

# KhUB traditions in Northern Lao People's Democratic Republic: Conservation and transmission

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*Date Received: January 26, 2015; Date Revised: April 9, 2015*

**Abstract** – *This qualitative research was conducted in three Northern provinces of the Lao People's Democratic Republic with the aim of investigating the traditional art of khUB music and its conservation and inheritance. Data were collected from documents and field research using interviews, observation and focus group discussions as data collection tools. The results show that Morkhub, musicians, teachers, students and audiences all contribute to the success or failure of conservation and inheritance of traditional Laotian music. The majority of problems with conservation stem from a lack of interest and the dilution of local culture with modern Western influences. As a result of this investigation, a four-point plan was proposed to standardize and support future conservation of khUB traditions by inclusion in the education system.*

**Keywords** – *Conservation, culture, khUB, Laotian music, transmission.*

## INTRODUCTION

Culture is part of the identity of a place and group of people. It shows the relationship between relatives, social groups, races and nationalities. Moreover, it is a social heritage received, maintained and inherited from one generation to the next in each age [1]. Culture, therefore, changes with time. Culture is the creation of concepts, beliefs, values, ideology, custom and traditions. This kind of culture is called *mental culture* [2]. Phraya Anumanrajadhon defined mental culture as including the thoughts, beliefs, feelings and knowledge used by people to help themselves and others [3]. As humans accumulate experiences and wisdom, mental culture is cultivated. Therefore, it is an indicator and guideline to living in society. World music can be regarded as a graceful and valuable part of that culture. Civilizations in each world region have their own patterns of music and folk songs reflecting the values of local people. Lao PDR is one country in Asia with a continuous, glorious and ancient musical culture [4].

Traditional singing in the northern part of Lao PDR is named *khUB* whereas that of the southern regions is called *lam*. *KhUB* is usually accompanied by *khaen*, a mouth organ made from bamboo/reed pipes. There are also local variations, such as *khUB tum*

*Luang Prabang* from Luang Prabang, which includes a *saw* (a fiddle), a *khim* (hammered dulcimer) and percussion instruments. The person who sings *khUB* is called a *Morkhub* or *Morlam* [5].

Recently, the formalities and particularities of music and, particularly, *khUB* in northern Lao PDR have been affected by social changes [6]. Additionally, if the art is not conserved and protected against the rising tide of Western music and contemporary media in Laotian society, it will be damaged and lost forever. Therefore, the researchers were interested in studying conservation and inheritance of *khUB* in northern Lao PDR in order to support its existence in modern society. By extension, this will also protect the cultural heritage of northern Lao PDR.

## Research context: The society and culture of Laos

Modern Laos is a country cohabited peacefully by several groups of people. There are no current independence movements and oppression of the Hmong population has been stopped [7]. The various ethnic groups in Laos have cooperated to develop the country since its establishment after the revolution of 1975. Luang Prabang is one large city in the north of Laos that epitomizes this attitude. A local saying

describes people as well-behaved and believers of Dharma [8]. This highlights the role of Buddhism in everyday life. Generally, the traditional Buddhist beliefs of Laotians are visible in their dance customs, musical performances and recreational activities. These comprise many of the rites and rituals that people perform throughout the year. Pranee Wongthate identified five key features of Laotian music: 1) Traditional music is usually related to rites and beliefs, especially those concerning the wealth, safety, security and unity of the community; 2) Music is an integral part of beliefs surrounding rice harvest; 3) Music is associated with certain occupations as it provided a supplementary income for seasonal workers; 4) Music performers strongly believe in the sanctity of motherhood and their beliefs in God, gurus and spirits is reflected in their performances; 5) Royal music developed differently from popular music due to the influence of foreign courts. Consequently, royal music has more performance regulations and limitations than popular music [9].

In general, stories covered in the music are about the knowledge, beliefs, skills, love, unity and relationships of Laotian people, which have become a part of social wisdom [10]. The art-form continues to be showcased at conventions, local ceremonies, art productions and in literary works. All areas of music knowledge and content have been inherited, improved and developed.

### Contents of *Khub*

In Laotian society, the culture of *khub* is considered to have an important role in the way of life [11]. This is because the content is educational as well as enjoyable. *Khub* retells stories of ancient literature that focus on morality, ethics, manners and religion. *Khub* is regarded as a part of musical heritage that is helpful in teaching knowledge of ancestral lifestyle.

*Khub* is a folk performance, so there are various melodies in northern Lao PDR. For example, the forms of *khub* in Luang Prabang are *khub tum Luang Prabang*, reading melody, *khub salang*, *khub sam sao*, *khub ma yong* and *khub nak sadung*. *Khub tum Luang Prabang* is a turn-based song. It is similar to the *charieag* or *kuntruem* of Cambodia. Changeable verses are performed to a short musical melody. The song is usually performed on auspicious occasions and never at funerals [12]. Reading melody is a male-female duet with a combined chorus that has no musical accompaniment. The content of the reading melody focuses on courtship, with three aspects: *phook books*, *longkhong* and *thongkun* for courtship.

*Khub salang* is sung to follow the reading melody. *Khub sam sao* is then sung after *khub salang*. It is regarded as an important form because it can be sung with other *khub*. However it must always be performed after *khub sam sao* so the combination is sometimes referred to as *salang sam sao*. *Khub ma yong* is popular due to its active rhythm and can be applied to contemporary singing. *Khub nak sabung* is most associated with Cambodian music because there are many Khmer words. The melody is also structurally similar to the Cambodian *kuntruem* [13].

### Knowledge of conservation and inheritance

The Ministry of Culture has stated that conservation, inheritance, creation and development of art and culture must maintain conventions and be consistent with education, research and existing systems of heritage conservation [14]. There should be integration of learning, both inside and outside the system. Learning will relate to the everyday life of people in society. People need to realize the importance of appropriate maintenance, development and application of culture by campaigns, promotion, exchange and learning. In this regard, the Ministry developed a set of practical guidelines, as follows: 1) Develop and promote cultural quality and standards; 2) Cooperate and promote cultural activities; 3) Develop, promote and support the spread of culture; 4) Promote, continue and support the implementation of culture for development.

These guidelines are a way of creating a cultural network that can collate information for analysis or application in accordance with the problems and needs of each region. This will be useful in the sustainable continuation and development of cultural activities.

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative investigation aims to study the art of *khub* and its conservation and inheritance in northern Lao PDR. Research was conducted by collecting data from documents and field study related to the history, background and types of *khub* songs and concepts. In addition, several theories of aesthetics, human science and culture, including content associated with the area of study were examined by analyzing documents from public and private educational institutions, government offices, texts, books, meeting reports, research theses and dissertations. All of these data were collected in order to be analyzed separately from various perspectives. The research area was purposively selected as three

provinces in northern Lao PDR, namely Hua Phan, Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang. These provinces were chosen due to their traditionally strong association with *khub* music conservation. Data collection tools used in the field were informal interview, formal interview, in-depth interview, non-participant observation, participant observation and focus group discussion. All collected data were validated using a process of triangulation. The verified data were then analyzed by means of analytic induction and typological analysis. The results are presented in this study as a descriptive analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were gathered by interview with, and observation of *Morkhub*, musicians, teachers, students and audiences. *Morkhub* in the northern Lao PDR sing *khub* during three regional performances: *Khuh phuan kwaeng Xieng Khouang*, *khuh sum neau* and *khuh taidaeng Hua Phan*. Reading melodies, *khuh tum Luang Prabang*, *khuh salang*, *khuh sam sao*, *khuh ma yong* and *khuh nak sabung* in Luang Prabang are all divided into three sections. The first section is before the *khub* is sung. Musicians prepare the stage and pay respect to their teacher and spirits by offering sacred objects to bless the ceremonial area. The second section is the *khub* performance. The third and last section is after the *khub* performance. A second blessing is performed and the musicians say goodbye to the host and the audience.

There are three big problems for *Morkhub* in northern Lao PDR. Firstly, it is a difficult skill to learn and requires a long, continuous and dedicated training period. Secondly, it is an unstable occupation because the income is insufficient for sustainable living. Thirdly, modern social changes necessitate adaptation of the performances, which many *Morkhub* are unable to do.

There are two types of musicians: common musicians and public musicians. Common musicians do not gain support from government organizations. Therefore, to enable individuals and groups to develop their skills, they must independently seek training from other musicians and suggestions from audiences. Public, government-sponsored musicians gain income and welfare at varying levels. Many have additional income from the private sector when they are hired to sing in different places or to teach music privately to those interested. The problems faced by general musicians are the same as those faced by *Morkhub*. In present Laotian society there is a lack of musicians. Moreover, western habits and trends are rapidly

penetrating, altering and displacing traditional culture. The younger generations are turning to foreign cultures and foreign music styles rather than learning their traditional music culture.

Teachers are categorized as independent music teachers and public music teachers. The independent teachers are usually more skilful *khuh* performers and teach at an advanced level. They gain reputation in the local community and can select their students. There is a problem with local music teachers who do not register as teachers and work on an informal basis. Additionally, local teachers lack equipment and teaching media. Public teachers follow a set of teaching standards. Recognized learning courses in music and classical dance have been improved to equal the level in neighboring countries. However, the income of public teachers is restricted by a lack of government budget. This means that there is a lack of teaching personnel. For some subjects there are no teachers and the level of teaching ability is low. Public institutions are left with no choice but to hire professionals with limited experience and skills. The teachers also have no chance to train or upgrade their own learning. Given budget shortages, there is also a lack of buildings, classrooms, libraries, auditoriums or practice rooms for student activities and performances. There are few musical instruments available for student use. The equipment that is provided is invariably insufficient for learner practice. The teaching equipment and media are incomplete and outdated. There are few textbooks and there has been a distinct lack of research on documents for traditional Laotian music education.

There are three groups of students: independent learners, formal learners and informal learners. There are several factors causing problems among learners of music in schools, temples and communities in northern Lao PDR. Importantly, communities have no budget to support and promote learning activities in *khuh* and folk song performance. At present, *khuh* learner numbers are dwindling. They are not interested in their own culture as their ancestors were.

There are also a number of real issues with present audiences. The young generation prefers movies, television dramas and modern international music because they are perceived as trendy and up-to-date. As a result, *khuh* songs are not as popular as before. Public organizations should cultivate the values of *khuh* in younger audiences. This will enable them to relate to *khuh* and generate an interest in *khuh* from childhood. Parents should invite their children to see live *khuh* performances. Also, *Morkhub* should

develop their performances to please younger audiences and persuade the young generation to pay attention to *khub*, which is part of their social heritage.

Nowadays, educators in Lao PDR view the problems as a product of modern cultural tendencies that are causing traditional culture to decline and disappear as time passes. As a result of focus group discussions during this investigation, local educators agreed to plan traditional musical culture education with the following four objectives: 1) To create more artists and young actors to inherit the culture, focusing on both the quality of performances and the quantity of new musical graduates. This movement will expose the art and music of Laos domestically and internationally; 2) To maintain the art and culture in terms of dance, *khub*, lam, singing and music in Lao PDR so that it is accurately represented but also more appropriate for modern society; 3) To open advanced level or bachelor's degree courses in the art of music to establish a school of music arts; 4) To enhance the knowledge and ability of young people to earn their living and survive in society while pursuing a musical career.

These objectives are based on the four-point strategy of the Ministry of Culture [15].

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of factors in the conservation and performance of *khub* in Lao PDR concerns all personnel involved in the art: *Morkhub*, musicians, teachers, students and audiences. All these people contribute to the success or failure of conservation and inheritance of social heritage. At present, modern musical culture plays a more active role in society. However, the personnel related to *khub* singing traditions must realize and promote its special and unique character. This includes the singing, the performance and the expression of words according to the principles of local folk singing. There are problems that the government should help solve by providing support and guidelines in order to maintain the sustainability of *khub* performance in Laotian society. General *khub* songs are on a pentatonic scale including the notes fa-so-la-do-re or do-re-me-fa-so. The composer uses these scales in all *khub* songs. However, the content of *khub* songs will change according to the different stories told in each song. Protection of traditional *khub* singing in society so that it can be performed and studied sustainably can be achieved by developing appropriate levels of concern in the public.

To ensure that the inheritance of *khub* maintains the traditional regulations and styles, customs and traditions, the government should use the educational system. Knowledge can be expanded and built to combat problems at the foundations of society. Inheritance through the formal education systems can be used to promote art, dance, singing and musical science to be more complete and suitable for modern society. Also, the government can prepare to open an advanced level qualification in the art of music.

Successful inheritance of *khub* is to be achieved by spreading knowledge. In order to do this the government should support the traditions by showcasing group performances, sponsoring private musicians and gathering *khub* community artists to view and solve different problems cooperatively. Personnel with appropriate experience, skills and community status should disseminate guidelines for younger generations, which will lead to faith in *khub* singing and a pattern of self-learning in the future.

#### SUGGESTIONS

The researchers wish to make three suggestions based on the conclusions of this investigation. Firstly, there are many kinds of folk song in the rural areas of Laos. This study of the factors in the art of *khub* in northern Lao PDR can be used by interested personnel to generate a comparative study with the culture of music in other areas. Secondly, the study of conservation guidelines for those related the art of *khub*, including *Morkhub*, musicians, teachers, students and audiences can be adapted to study the cultural strengths of *khub*. Additionally, the musical science of humans in other societies and communities can be studied to enhance the understanding of this research. Thirdly, the study of inheritance in northern Lao PDR enables creation of guidelines for studying regulations, patterns, customs, traditions and cultures of music, which will help interested personnel to analyze the background of musical culture more accurately.

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