

The Significance of Percussion Instruments in Isan Thai Folk Music within the Context of Music Education and Learning

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Abstract

In northeastern Thailand, the beating heart of tradition and music intertwines seamlessly. The objective of this study was to explore the significance of percussion instruments in Isan Thai folk music within the context of music education and learning. The scope of the research site spans the northeastern Provinces of Thailand. The study employs qualitative interviews with experts and practitioners, complemented by field visits and observations. The findings emphasize that Isan Thai folk music serves as a cultural bridge, nurturing mutual understanding and expressing the extraordinary occurrences within the community. Music education emerges as a pivotal tool in safeguarding the cultural heritage of Isan Thai folk music, offering students a window into diverse cultures, and enriching their appreciation of the world's cultural tapestry. Despite challenges such as a dearth of successors and waning interest among the younger generation. The preservation of Isan percussion instruments is an invaluable component of intangible cultural heritage, thus contributing substantially to the broader discourse on cultural heritage preservation and the role of music education in fostering cross-cultural appreciation and understanding.

Keywords: Isan Thai Folk Music, percussion instruments, cultural heritage, music education, preservation.

1. Introduction

Music, an enduring art form, intricately intertwines itself with the essence of human life, becoming an ever-present force in our daily existence. Beyond mere entertainment, music serves as a therapeutic sanctuary, offering solace amidst life's demands and forging a profound connection to the emotional tapestry of Thai culture. In Thai society, music transcends occasional indulgence; it stands as an inseparable element within belief systems, culture, and the very fabric of life (Lee, 2010).

The categorization of musical instruments has evolved historically, lacking a systematic approach until humans studied and developed classifications (Dawe, 2012; Savage et al., 2015). These categories exhibit remarkable diversity across cultures and geographical regions, reflecting the myriad ways in which instruments have been conceived. Thai music culture, for example, classifies instruments based on playing techniques or associated action verbs like strumming, plucking, striking, and blowing (Miller & Chonpairot, 1994). On the other hand, there are other ways to categorize instruments, such as the materials used in their construction or the Confucian classification of Chinese musical instruments based on eight natural elements (Thrasher, 2008; Murray, 2012; Tan, 2018).

Folk music and the performing arts stand as cultural treasures, meticulously crafted to enhance life's joys, and transmitted across generations through oral traditions encompassing humor, oratory traditions, mentorship, and memory preservation (Tzima et al., 2020). These traditions resonate with melody, lyrics, and the use of a modest selection of instruments, finding vibrant expression during communal festivals and rituals where communities converge in celebration. Festivals like Songkran and faith-rooted traditions eloquently underscore music's pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and providing an outlet for the societal pressures that burden us (Reily & Brucher, 2018; Gioia, 2019).

These insights illuminate the enduring legacy of Northeastern percussion instruments in Thailand, shaped by cultural exchanges and influences, contributing significantly to the identities of folk artists and the broader music

education system (Hao et al., 2023; Baer, 2023). The research aims to explore the significance of percussion instruments in Isan Thai folk music within the context of music education and learning. Its main goals are to recognize and stress the importance of Isan percussion instruments, set educational goals to make it easier to learn about them in the context of Isan music and its rich cultural heritage, and do field research using qualitative and correlational research methods (Yannavut, 2016; Chaichana, 2022; Yan et al., 2023).

In essence, this research strives to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical applications in the realm of Isan music. Its overarching objective is to raise awareness about the intrinsic value and artistic roots of Northeastern percussion instruments in Thailand, ensuring the preservation and transmission of their invaluable wisdom to future generations. By doing so, it safeguards the enduring vibrancy of this cherished cultural tradition, connecting generations through the rhythmic heartbeat of Isan Thai folk music.

2. Research Objectives

To explore the significance of Percussion Instruments in Isan Thai Folk Music within the Context of Music Education and Learning.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Understanding Isan Percussion Instruments in Isan Thai Folk Music

Isan, a region in northeastern Thailand, boasts a rich tradition of music deeply intertwined with its cultural heritage. A fundamental aspect of Isan music lies in its diverse array of percussion instruments, which play a vital role in the region's musical tapestry. To gain insight into the significance of these percussion instruments within the context of Isan Thai folk music and music education, it is crucial to delve into the knowledge and history surrounding these instruments. Isan's musical instruments can be broadly categorized into four types: typewriters, painters, and percussion and wind instruments. In this context, we focus on the percussion instruments, which occupy a unique place in Isan music (Sansak et al., 2014).

1) Pong Lang: The Pong Lang instrument is renowned for its stable and melodious sound, a result of the wood used in its construction. It employs a five-note system (Do, Re, Mi, Sol, and La) with twelve distinct notes, offering versatility in music composition. A common technique in playing the Pong Lang involves one instrumentalist delivering a single strike while another simultaneously strikes two notes during the main chorus, creating harmonious melodies. Pong Lang songs are characterized by rhythmic patterns that align with the song's theme, such as the Lai Tai Khon pattern, the flying bird Kham Thung, and the crow dance cube pattern, among others. This musical tradition exemplifies the creativity and cultural significance of Pong Lang in Isan Thai folk music.

2) Seng Drum: Also known as the Jing drum or Tae drum, the Seng Drum is a distinctive percussion instrument deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of Isan, northeastern Thailand. This double-sided drum serves multiple purposes, often being used in lively competitions and during merit parades. Its name, "Seng Drum," originates from its primary role in competitive drumming, highlighting its importance in fostering community spirit and celebration. In Isan dialects, it may also be referred to as "drum jing" or "drum tae," names that echo the sounds produced during its vibrant performances.

3) Tum Drum: The Tum Drum, resembling a double-sided horn, is distinctive for having two identical faces. Its name likely derives from the sound it produces. In Thai culture, the Tum Drum, alongside the Long Drum, is employed to accompany parades and dance processions during various festivals.

4) Tueng Drum: A substantial drum used in long drum ensembles; the Tueng Drum requires the participation of two individuals. The person at the rear beats in harmony with the front drummer. This dual-beating technique likely gave rise to its name, Tueng Drum, echoing the sound it generates.

5) Kabbian Drum: Known as the "kab bia" drum, this single-sided drum is commonly used alongside other instruments like the drum and tail drum to accompany processions and dances during various merit-related events.

6) Long Drum: Falling within the category of long drums, the Long Drum distinguishes itself with its slender, tail-like shape. It is often used in conjunction with the Tu Drum and Chevron Drum to accompany dances and processions during merit-related events.

7) Panghad: An ancient type of gong, the Panghad lacks a central button commonly found in typical gongs. Its name is derived from the sound it produces and is frequently used in dances and parades.

8) Gup-Gap: An indigenous instrument from the Northeast, the Gub-Gap is crafted from two wooden pieces, sometimes grooved for tapping or rubbing together in rhythmic patterns. Some variations include puzzles or

bells to enhance their captivating sound. The gub-gap is widely employed to create a distinctive rhythm known as “doctor lam kup-gap.”

Northeastern music can be classified into two primary groups: the Lam Can Group and the Lampi Can Group (Pu Tai Group). The Lam Khan Group comprises a significant population residing in Provinces such as Loei, Nong Khai, Udon Thani, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Chaiyaphum, Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, Kalasin, Mukdahan, Roi Et, Yasothon, and Ubon Ratchathani.

3.2 The Theory of Cultural Diffusion

The Theory of Cultural Diffusion examines the intricate process through which cultures interact and exchange elements. This theory is fundamental in fields like anthropology and sociology, shedding light on the evolution of societies and the enrichment of their cultural tapestry through interactions with external influences (Smith, 2006). Cultural diffusion takes various forms, including relocation diffusion, expansion diffusion, and stimulus diffusion, with factors like geography, technology, trade, migration, and politics influencing the extent and pace of diffusion (Brown, 2016). This theory provides valuable insights into the dynamic nature of cultures and their role in shaping human civilization.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and creative approach involving the collection of data from research papers and field observations to comprehensively explore the subject. The study focuses on exploring the significance of percussion instruments in Isan Thai folk music within the context of music education and learning. The research procedures and methods related to these objectives are categorized as follows:

- 1) Document Retrieval: This phase involves the systematic retrieval of information from written documents, including academic papers, historical records, and related literature, to build a foundational understanding of Isan percussion instruments.
- 2) Online Media Research: The study extensively examines online sources and media platforms to access contemporary insights, discussions, and developments surrounding Isan percussion instruments.
- 3) Interviews: Qualitative interviews with experts, practitioners, and individuals knowledgeable about Isan music and percussion instruments are conducted to gather valuable insights, opinions, and firsthand experiences.
- 4) Field Visits and Observations: Conduct field visits to observe and document the real-world use of Isan percussion instruments in various contexts. These observations provide crucial data on instrument usage, performance, and the social and cultural significance of these instruments.

Each of these methodologies is designed to contribute unique perspectives and data sources to the overall research, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of Isan percussion instruments within the context of music and culture.

The data analysis for this study on Isan percussion instruments within the context of music education and learning will encompass a multifaceted approach. Qualitative data collected from interviews, field observations, and research papers will undergo thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to the instruments' significance and educational implications. Comparative analysis will be employed to trace the evolution and variations of these instruments across different regions and historical contexts. Additionally, case studies will provide in-depth insights into specific instances of instrument usage in educational settings. Through these analytical strategies, this research aims to illuminate the cultural importance of Isan percussion instruments and their role in music education, fostering a comprehensive understanding of their significance.

5. Result

5.1 The Role of Isan Thai Folk Music.

Culture encompasses a way of life, encompassing concepts, ideals, traditions, values, customs, and wisdom collaboratively developed, accrued, nurtured, and passed down by groups and societies. Cultural heritage, a subset of culture, represents the unique and valuable aspects of the past transmitted across generations. International and national laws for protecting cultural heritage distinguish between tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage, known as “cultural heritage,” in Thai law. These legal frameworks acknowledge the rights of individuals and communities to protect, restore, and promote their local and national wisdom, arts, cultures, customs, and traditions.

Su's research illuminates the distinctive role of folk music within intangible cultural heritage, particularly its

capacity to enhance human physical and mental well-being. The study pursues three primary objectives: assessing tourist interest in intangible heritage, gauging visitors' perceptions of intangible heritage, and prioritizing tourist attractions and intangible heritage activities from the perspective of domestic tourists. The findings underscore the importance of preserving original songbooks originating from remote highland regions, showcasing the cultural richness of Sothern Jharkhand, China.

Music occupies a central place in the lives of the Isan people, with nearly every subregion in the Northeast boasting its distinctive folk music, reflecting the local culture and way of life. Language, literature, and folk songs play pivotal roles in the region's musical culture, with folk songs often transmitted within social contexts, perpetuated, and passed down through generations through cultivation. Younger generations actively engage in preserving, creating, developing, and promoting Isan folk music, both directly and indirectly, with significant participation in the region's traditional festivals that serve as crucial occasions for family and community bonding.

Isan folk music has always been a cultural cornerstone, instrumental in shaping the identity and values of the community and providing insights into the perceptions of other cultures. It permeates all aspects of societal life, with historical and traditional narratives particularly influenced by it. Music serves as a bridge for cultural exchange between diverse groups from various backgrounds and nations, fostering mutual understanding and providing a means to express extraordinary occurrences.

Music education plays a pivotal role in introducing students to diverse cultures, significantly contributing to their understanding of the world's cultural tapestry. Music remains an ever-evolving part of society, offering diverse avenues for self-expression and adapting to each generation. In its various forms, music continues to entertain and resonate with emotions through lyrics, styles, and choreography, standing as the predominant art form in contemporary society, especially with the proliferation of music streaming platforms such as Spotify, iTunes, and YouTube.

5.2 The Importance of Isan Thai Folk Music

Folk music plays a pivotal role in our society and culture, serving as a bridge to our heritage and a compass guiding us into the future. It acts as a vital link to our past, keeping it alive and fostering a sense of direction for generations to come. Furthermore, folk music offers a profound connection to our cultural heritage, enabling individuals and communities to identify with their roots.

Folk music has a unique way of narrating stories of both jubilation and sorrow, providing a medium for people to express their deepest emotions through words and melodies. It has left an indelible mark on our society's history and culture, shaping, and defining our identity. Folk songs chronicle the lives of significant figures, places, events, and phenomena within communities, illustrating their profound impact.

In the Isan region, finding one's cultural roots can be a challenging endeavor, often met with resistance. This ethnic diversity is apparent in the diverse folk songs that harken back to these roots. Folk music takes on various forms, but true folk music is characterized by its absence of synthesizers.

The enduring value of Isan folk music and folk performing arts for today's youth underscores their significance in the contemporary physical and mental development of young individuals. These art forms, integral to folk music, are regularly showcased in everyday life and social gatherings. Isan folk music is not only a representation of traditional culture but also holds substantial value in ethnology, folklore, cultural studies, human advancement, and artistic beauty.

Nevertheless, in this age of information, societal perceptions of beauty, lifestyles, and economic structures are evolving, giving rise to challenges such as a shortage of successors, dwindling public interest in Isan folk music culture, insufficient promotion, and the absence of consistent policies and regulations. Due to regional sentiments, sacrificial beliefs, and antiquated myths, young people may show little enthusiasm for learning folk music.

To ensure the sustainable development of folk music, a comprehensive system overhaul and exploration of development avenues through the lens of public sentiment, holistic system reform, and protective measures are imperative. Such measures will preserve the cultural heritage of Isan folk music, ensuring its relevance and value for generations to come.

5.3 The Physical Characteristics and Sound Production of Isan Thai Folk Music.

The percussion instruments in Isan music are categorized into three distinct groups, each rooted in specific cultural divisions. These cultural groups serve as reflections of human life within their respective societies,

encompassing aspects such as progress, customs, traditions, knowledge, beliefs, and religion. These cultural traditions have been passed down from generation to generation, preserving their significance from the past to the present. The three primary groups are as follows:

- Korat Cultural Groups: This group represents Nakhon Ratchasima Province.
- Kantrum Cultural Groups: Encompassing Surin Province, Buriram Province, and Sisaket Province.
- Mor Lam Cultural Groups: Encompassing Loei Province, Nong Khai Province, Udon Thani Province, Sakon Nakhon Province, Nakhon Phanom Province, Nong Bua Lamphu Province, Mukdahan Province, Khon Kaen Province, Mahasarakham Province, Kalasin, Yasothon, Roi Et, Chaiyaphum, Amnat Charoen, and Ubon Ratchathani.

These distinct groups contribute to the rich tapestry of Isan music, highlighting the cultural diversity and historical significance of the region.

1) The Korat cultural group features a distinctive musical element known as the “Korat tone,” a percussion instrument specifically designed to accompany the traditional dance called the “tone dance.” The Korat tone possesses unique characteristics that set it apart from other tones, such as the Chatri tone and the Mahori tone. These distinctive features include the construction of the tone house, which is crafted from terracotta, and the use of boa skin, lizard skin, or badass to create a one-sided membrane for directing the beat.



Figure 1. Korat tone drum

Source: Watchara Homhuan (from fieldwork 2023)

Three crucial factors that contribute to the tone’s soft, mellow quality and gradually reduce the bass until it vanishes to create a melodic sound determine how loud or soft it is. During nighttime performances, terracotta is the preferred material for crafting the tone. Consequently, the production site for the tone is typically located in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, with one well-known and widely recognized location being Ban Dan Kwian in Dan Kwian Subdistrict, Chok Chai District, Nakhon Ratchasima Province.

The “tone dance” is a traditional folk performance with a long history, particularly prevalent in Korat, where it has been practiced for over 90 years. This distinctive form of entertainment relies exclusively on the tone as its primary instrument, producing rhythms by striking two or more articulates.

2) The Kantrum cultural group: The drum is a percussion instrument commonly used in accompanying contemplative ensembles. Within the Kantrum cultural groups, two types of drums are typically employed: wooden drums and terracotta drums. Wooden drums are crafted from solid wood, such as jackfruit or pradu wood, or Ching Khan wood and coconut trunks. They are shaped by turning the outer layer before hollowing out the interior, and they are covered with boa or lizard skin. On the other hand, Terracotta drums are created by molding clay into the drum body and then firing it to achieve hardness. Drumheads are often made from lizard or boa skin.



Figure 2. Kantrum drum

Source: Watchara Homhuan (from fieldwork 2023).

The significance of drumming within the Kantrum Band cannot be overstated. This ensemble typically includes 2 drums, 1 fiddle, 1 fiddle, and 1 lau as accompanying instruments. The band's instrumentation usually comprises 2–3 drums, 1 fiddle, 1 fiddle, and 1 lau, with variations in the number of drums based on intensity. The presence of 2–3 drums not only adds weight to the overall sound but also enhances the listening experience, providing a unique auditory dimension to Kantrum drumming. At times, 2–3 drums are played in a slightly overlapping manner, contributing to the distinctive sound of the Kantrum drum. Furthermore, the Kantrum or Skuel drum plays a crucial role in regulating the tempo of the songs performed within the Kantrum Band. It also serves as an instrument that alternates with the vocals, marking the conclusion of a song or paragraph with a distinctive “notch.”

3) The Mor Lam cultural group: The Drum Seng, also known as Drum Jing or Drum Tae, is a percussion instrument characterized by its double-sided drum design. It consists of a wooden drum shell with cow or buffalo skin stretched tightly across both sides and secured with leather ropes. When struck, it produces a powerful and resonant sound. Historically, it served as a battle drum, used during conflicts to signal commands and messages to large groups of people during disasters. As times changed and conflicts subsided, villagers began using the Seng drum for recreational purposes, engaging in friendly competitions known as “Seng Drum” (with “Seng” in the Isan language meaning “to race”). It became a popular form of entertainment and a prominent feature of traditional events, including the April-May Bun Fireball Festival.



Figure 3. Seng drum

Source: Watchara Homhuan (from fieldwork 2023).

Drum Seng, also referred to as Drum King, is a distinctive percussion instrument of the Isan people known for its loud and commanding sound. It is prominently featured in competitions during various traditional events, such as the fireworks festival. Dr. Boonprasassandra further explains that the Isan people have a year-round folk tradition called the Twelve Heat Tradition. These traditions are regarded as merit and charity, intertwined with festivities accompanying the merit-making process.

The Seng Drum competitions typically occur in the 4th month of Merit Pha Waew, the 6th month during the

Fireball festival, the 8th month of Lent, and the 11th month of Lent. The 4th and 6th months, marked by Seng Drum competitions, are popular periods for managing and participating in these events.

The Seng drum holds special significance as a symbol of unity among villagers. Constructing a pair of Seng drums requires the collective effort of many people working together. After acquiring the drum shells, community members come together to assemble and tune the drums to produce a high, clear, and resonant sound. Subsequently, the drums are transported to the championship stage. This process takes several days, highlighting how the Drum Seng serves as a medium that unites villagers in collaborative activities and traditional merit-making practices.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this research focused on the significance of percussion instruments in Isan Thai folk music within the context of music education and learning and align consistently with the theoretical principles and objectives outlined in the earlier sections of this study.

The cultural importance of Isan Thai folk music, as illuminated by this research, resonates with the theoretical underpinning of the study. Isan music is deeply woven into the cultural fabric of the region, serving as a means of expressing traditions, values, and the unique identity of the Isan people. This aligns with the Theory of Cultural Diffusion, which emphasizes the role of culture in shaping human civilization and enriching the cultural tapestry through interactions with external influences (Smith, 2006). The findings underscore that Isan Thai Folk Music represents a traditional art form and a bridge for cultural exchange, fostering mutual understanding and serving to express extraordinary occurrences within the community.

The research findings also emphasize the pivotal role of music education in preserving the cultural heritage of Isan Thai Folk Music. Music education serves as a vehicle for introducing students to diverse cultures and deepening their understanding of the world's cultural tapestry. This aligns with the broader principles of music education, where music serves as a conduit for cultural transmission and enrichment. The significance of Isan percussion instruments in this context highlights their role in fostering a comprehensive understanding of cultural heritage (Yannavut, 2016).

The detailed examination of the physical characteristics and sound production of Isan percussion instruments provides valuable insights into their uniqueness and cultural significance. The research results, including descriptions of instruments like the Korat tone drum, Kantrum drum, and Seng drum, not only align with the research objectives but also demonstrate how the distinct qualities of these instruments contribute to their role in Isan music and culture. The research reinforces the idea that the physical characteristics of musical instruments are deeply intertwined with their cultural identity (Baer, 2023).

While the research findings celebrate the cultural richness and significance of Isan percussion instruments, they also shed light on challenges such as a shortage of successors and dwindling public interest in Isan folk music. These challenges are consistent with the evolving nature of societies, where changing perceptions of beauty, lifestyles, and economic structures impact the continuity of traditional art forms. However, the research concludes by emphasizing the imperative need for a comprehensive system overhaul and protective measures to ensure the sustainable development of Isan folk music. This aligns with the broader principles of cultural preservation and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

In conclusion, this research delving into the significance of percussion instruments in Isan Thai folk music within the context of music education and learning has yielded findings that are consistent with the research's theoretical principles and objectives. The cultural significance of Isan music, its role in music education, the unique characteristics of Isan percussion instruments, and the challenges faced by this traditional art form have all been illuminated through this study.

The research underscores that Isan Thai folk music stands as a vibrant and integral part of the cultural heritage of the Isan region. It serves as a bridge for cultural exchange, a means to express tradition and values, and a tool for deepening the understanding of cultural diversity through music education.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of preserving Isan percussion instruments as invaluable components of intangible cultural heritage. While challenges exist, such as declining interest among the younger generation, the research emphasizes the need for proactive measures and holistic system reforms to ensure the sustainability and relevance of Isan folk music for generations to come.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the preservation of cultural heritage and the role of music education in enriching cultural understanding. It reaffirms the enduring significance of Isan Thai folk music and its percussion instruments in the context of evolving societies and cultural dynamics.

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