

Khab Tai Dam (Black Tai Folksongs): The Preservation and Adaptation of Musical Culture for the Maintenance of Ethnic Identity

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Abstract

This article aims to describe the identity maintenance of the Tai Dam ethnic group through an analysis of musical components of Khab Tai Dam which was a cultural symbol that changed in accordance with the social context. The case study was mainly of Tai Dam people living in Laos, Vietnam and Thailand.

The study result found that Khab Tai Dam serves two functions; it is sung at ritual ceremonies and for entertainment culture. The first function is tied to the Tai Dam belief that the singer must learn and strictly follow the traditional practice of Khab Tai Dam as it has been preserved by their ancestors and transmitted from one generation to another. The second function involves an adaptation of Khab Tai Dam by blending the traditional rhythm and content with the rhythmic patterns of modern musical instruments such as the electone in order to appeal to a wider audience, especially Tai Dam teenagers.

In all three countries, both functions were found but Khab Tai Dam's roles have diminished. In Thailand, the ethnic musical components or patterns of singing have been maintained. However, the role of Khab Tai Dam has changed to become a cultural demonstration of ethnic cultural preservation at the annual festival held in Tai Dam communities. In Vietnam, the singing has also been maintained but new technology in the form of karaoke DVDs is used to promote Khab Tai Dam. Music videos portraying various aspects

of ethnic life have been produced. In Laos, the Lam Phloen rhythm, which is a part of mainstream Lao musical culture, has been incorporated into the traditional patterns and an electronic organ has replaced traditional instruments like gongs. The diminished roles of Khab Tai Dam in the three countries reflects the fact that traditional Khab Tai Dam is rarely being transmitted down to qualified successors. Without a willing new generation to take over the art, traditional Khab Tai Dam no longer functions as a cultural symbol. On the other hand, modern Khab Tai Dam, which has been changed and adapted for learning and succession purposes, has retained the typical features of Tai Dam music whilst also blending in modern music. Consequently, modern Khab Tai Dam is able to continue to express Tai Dam identity within the dynamic societies of the three countries.

Keywords: Tai Dam; Black Tai; Ethnomusicology; Ethnic Identity; Khab Tai Dam; folksong

Introduction

The ethnic Tai Dam group is found in four countries: China, Laos, Thailand, and northeastern Vietnam. They believe that their ancestors originated in Sipsongchuthai Region, the homeland of the Tai peoples in Southeast Asia and migrated to other countries due to conflicts or in search of better and more fertile land on which to settle.

Singing accompanied by bamboo free-reed pipes has been part of the musical culture of this region for over 3,000 years. Various ethnic groups use a variety of bamboo grown in their communities to make pipes. A piece of thin metal is used as a mouthpiece while other ethnic groups use it in a dried gourd to produce a softer melody. Nowadays, bamboo pipes are played as an accompaniment to singing. They are found in the music of various ethnic groups such as in the Lanna, Phu Tai, Khmer, and Lue cultures. Singers were usually women who are regarded as the spiritual leaders in society, such as shamans. Later, the singing could be enjoyed by both men and women with lyrics usually about the group's history, folktales, livelihoods, courtships, and various forms of entertainment (Wongthes, 2010).

A number of studies have described how the Tai Dam ethnic group has maintained its culture of singing together with bamboo pipes, known as “Khab Tai Dam”. This musical culture is shared by other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. The melodies and singing of Khab Tai Dam vary according to daily life activities and have continued as a tradition for several hundred years. Nowadays, Tai Dam people live in different countries but they maintain the original Khab Tai Dam melodies and singing which are typical of this ethnic group

The Tai Dam in Southeast Asia have inevitably been impacted by globalization like other ethnic groups. State restrictions on the expression of ethnic identity in public spaces has made it necessary to select, receive, adapt, or change ethnic cultural symbols in the midst of prohibitive social conditions in each country in order to preserve distinctiveness in a multi-cultural society. Interesting issues include what conservation process the ethnic group employs to maintain its musical identity, as a cultural symbol, and how ethnic musical components can create a collective awareness of ethnicity or a relationship with people of different cultures to better understand ethnicity in a dynamic and changing society.

This investigation focuses on Khab Tai Dam as a case study with the aim to explore the ethnic identity conservation process amid dynamic changes and diversity in the context of ASEAN. This qualitative study is based on an ethno-musicological investigation using mainly field data. In Thailand, the field site was Khao Yoi District in Phetchaburi Province, the original settlement of Tai Dam in Thailand. In Laos, three Tai Dam villages in Luang Namtha Province were chosen because they are more densely populated, and there is considerable ethnic diversity in the area. Furthermore, Tai Dam in Vietnam believe that Muang Thaen or Dien Bien Phu was the location of original settlement, so Dien Bien Phu and Son La Provinces were selected for this study on the maintenance of their ethnic musical culture.

The study results may be used by ethnic groups regarded as sub-cultures by governing systems in ASEAN as a guide to creating social space in which to adapt to new social conditions brought about by future cultural influences. Furthermore, it can also serve as a model for conserving the musical identities of other ethnic groups that share a similar singing culture.

The Studies of Ethnic Identity through Music

From a review of the literature on ethnic identity maintenance through music and other related studies, the content was synthesized to create the conceptual framework for this study. It started from an understanding of ethnic identity as a component to create meanings without definite aspects. Ethnic identity in this respect is merely a fluctuating social status, set to undergo changes depending on interaction under various conditions during each period of history. Such a study is defined by ethnologists as related ethnological instrumentalism (Kanjaphan, 2005).

Barth, (as cited in Luangaramsri, 2003, 2-24) elaborated on the concept of ethnicity and boundaries explaining that it stemmed from group members being able to choose certain cultural aspects to define their identity. Multiple aspects of culture are thereby selected and altered by group members to define their identity and so, ethnic boundaries or membership are subject to change. Additionally, Barth proposed that identity be considered at the awareness level of group members. Two ethnic groups may have similar cultural patterns but

not be regarded as the same group; instead, the symbols that are unique to each group distinguish the two. (Barth, as cited in Prachuabmoh, 2004, 14-20).

Group formation in a new place can maintain one's ethnicity with the group opting to integrate certain aspects of its ethnic culture as cultural symbols to express their ethnicity. In an article, considering Karen identity expression through the Ja play, Buadaeng (2003) explained that the Karen selected important components of the Burmese play – particularly paying homage to teacher's spirits – to enhance the solemnity of the play and to raise the ethnic cultural status to that of the Burmese, because they respected the same spirits and conducted the same rituals. Regarding music as a symbolic behavior of humans, Merriam (2002) summarized that music conveys symbolic meanings at four levels. The first level is a signing or symbolizing to convey meaning through music structures such as melodies, lyrics, rhythms, and instruments. The second level is music as a symbolic tool to express emotions and feelings and to reflect different meanings in different cultures. For instance, jazz was once connected to barbarism and a symbol of atheism and evil. In certain societies, musical modes are symbols to be conveyed to deities and sacred spirits. Furthermore, musical modes such as ragas in Indian music represent gender differences. In Chinese philosophy, there are five musical modes which represent five types of good deeds.

The third level reflects corporate cultures and social values. In a society, there are different functions, social structures and organization cultures. In this respect, music could reflect components of various social sectors. The last level is an attempt to find shared points of behavioral expression via music at the universal level. In this aspect, music is significant at the spiritual level. Music of all types has a mysterious power to awake man to discover his true self. Even sexuality, which was once interpreted as something expressed through music, is in fact expressed through the personal attributes of the composer. Therefore, symbolic expression via music mainly emphasizes the characteristics of the composer.

In summary, cultural symbols that reflect ethnicity are no longer core or inherent aspects, but rather are replete with semantic creations and changes in accordance with the dynamic cultural changes of the time. This investigation

hopes to explain ethnic identity maintenance through Khab Tai Dam musical culture. The singing is regarded as a cultural symbol used as a tool to create and change definitions of Tai Dam identity via the process of creating new and unique ethnic musical components, sharing with and learning from external cultures, integrating meanings to create an aesthetic value for the music, and raising awareness of certain historical aspects of symbol maintenance that distinguish this ethnic group through musical components. This is done to actively and sustainably maintain its ethnic identity within diverse cultural space.

Khab Tai Dam in the Socio-Cultural Contexts of Tai Dam in the Three Countries

The Tai Dam ethnic group has a culture of singing accompanied by pipe playing, similar to other ethnic groups, that is still practiced to this day. Although the Tai Dam groups in the three areas under study reside under, and have had to adapt to different socio-cultural contexts, studies reveal that Khab Tai Dam commonly play two important social roles: in rituals (music for supernatural entities) and for entertainment (music for people).

The Role of Khab Tai Dam in Rituals

Animistic spirit beliefs have always been a part of the Tai Dam cultural tradition. Spirits are defined as supernatural entities that are believed to be able to protect community members from dangers and enable them to lead a peaceful and happy life. Examples of the spirits include *Thaen*, city spirits, or household spirits or ancestor spirits. In the houses of Tai Dam families is reserved on area especially for the spirits of ancestors where the *Sen Huan* appeasement ritual is conducted.

During the *Sen* ritual, the Khab Tai Dam is performed by a shaman called *Mor Mod*, who is in charge of communicating with supernatural entities. The musical instrument used during this ritual is a bamboo free-reed pipe. The pipe used by Tai Dam in Luang Namtha Province, Laos, is called *Lao Luang* pipe and is about an arm's length with six fingering holes and one thumb hole for playing six melodies. Khab Tai Dam with pipe playing is

performed at every *Sen* ritual, each with a different singing style and melody. In an important *Sen* ritual, 32 melodies are performed, which takes three days and three nights. For other rituals such for healing sickness, six to seven melodies are performed typically taking 12 hours (S. Watthonglue, personal communication, January 9, 2016).

Khab Tai Dam at the *Sen* ritual of the Tai Dam in Vietnam varies according to the type of ritual; some may be accompanied by pipe playing like those in Laos. A male shaman known as *Mod Lao* conducts regular *Sen* rituals and a *Mod Tai* female shaman conducts more important *Sen* rituals. The rituals conducted by the male shaman are not accompanied by pipes and this custom is practiced in all three areas under study (Van Ing, personal communication, December 22, 2015; Raengphet, 2002).

Khab Tai Dam performed at the *Sen* ritual in Thailand is also called *Khab Mod*. The purposes of the *Sen* ritual transmission in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam are the same but the naming of the *Sen* ritual in the three countries is different. The steps of the *Sen* ritual are fewer than in the past by increasing the tempo of the *Khab Mod* rhythm. On the other hand, the lyrics of *Khab Mod* are strongly maintained through the shaman's memory and written record. The lyrics are formed into lines. Each line has a rhyming structure. Repetition of words is used to exhibit the aesthetics of language as exemplified in the excerpt of *Sen* ritual lyrics below.

“เฮือนหย่าวชาวฝา ปอแมตางนี้อยู่เหิงนานยานคาว
huen yaw saw fa por mae tang ni yu herng nan yan khaw
‘In this house, the old folks have lived for a long time.’

ไปบอไล่เสนบอไล่ฟอน เฮ๊ะหน้าไต้ตาดันต้อ มอหลวงปานไต้ไล่
pai bor lai sen bor lai fon or na kai tarn tor mor luang parn kai lai
They did not conduct the *Sen* ritual. They went to see a shaman.
‘He suggested they conduct the *Sen* ritual.’

ไปไล่ตีเสนตีฟอน ฮอดมือเว็นตำกำเว็นดี ปีเป็นหมาขึ้น
pai lai tue sen tue fon hot mue wen tam kam wen dee pi bucan ma khuen
‘So, they conducted the *Sen* ritual at an auspicious time.’

ญึ่งมีหอมะทอปู เมื่อวานกวานไต่กวานทมอ กวานไต่กวานทมอญึ่งฮักญึ่งแปง
 young mi hor ma hor poo mua warn kwan tai kwan mor kwan tai kwan
 mor young hug young pang

‘They brought bundle of betel nuts and leaves and invited the shaman
 who still cared for them and had not left them.’

ญึ่งบอถีมไปไก บอไลไปฮีน
 young bor thim pai kai bor lai pai uen
 ‘The shaman did not chase them away.’

ญึ่งฮับหอมะไว้เต็งเกล้า เซ่านอนไว้เต็งหัว
 young hub hor ma hor poo ma wai terng kao khao non wai terng hua
 ‘He took the bundle of betel nuts and leaves from them and lifted it
 above his head. When he went to bed, he put it on the bed head.’

สิบลวงปอ กอหลวงครู
 sip luang por kor luang khu
 ‘The shaman invited the spirits of all former shamans who had taught him.’
 คูหลวงแต่มือเฮา คูเก่าแต่มือฮาน
 khu luang tae mue hau khu thao tae mue harn
 ‘They were his teachers from the old days.’

สิบลคูต่อ ก้อคูสาน คูบออาจันญึ่งฮักญึ่งแปง”
 sip khu tor kor khu san khu bar a jarn young hug young pang
 ‘The teachers who transmitted knowledge. The teachers who still cared
 for him.’

(Sithithaneenan, personal communication, December 2, 2016)

The pipe accompanying the singing is known as *Mai Maen* and made from a variety of bamboo called *Hia*, similar to that used in Laos. The instrument is played as part of an ensemble of four to seven players, depending on how important the particular ritual is. There are two sizes of pipe: large and small. The large pipe is 35 to 42 inches in length and one inch in diameter

with six fingering holes and one thumb hole and played by two players in the ensemble. The leader of the ensemble continuously orchestrates the melody and pitch for the singer to follow. The small pipe is obviously smaller in size but with the same number of holes. Nowadays, the role of the ensemble is diminishing and they perform only during important Sen rituals. The situation for Khab Tai Dam and pipe ensembles in Thailand is dire due to lack of young performers such that shamans and pipe players often need to be hired from other communities (Sithithaneenan, personal communication, April 18, 2016; Raengphet, 2002).

From the cultural data on the *Sen* rituals obtained in the study areas, it was found that the role of the singing shamans is crucial as they are believed to be able to communicate with the spirits to whom the ethnic group pays respect. The content of the songs sung in different styles is similar because the rituals are considered sacred; therefore, each step of the performance must be followed strictly. The shamans play an important role in maintaining and transferring down these traditional practices, apart from being community spiritual leaders.

The Role of Khab Tai Dam for entertainment

Aside from the rituals, Khab Tai Dam is a musical culture that has existed as a part of Tai Dam daily life. It serves as an expression of their human condition by which they create music in response to social activities. For instance, lullabies reflect moral and ethical values for children to learn to become good members of society. Khab Tai Dam content may reflect the livelihoods of rural people or offer lessons to refine the morals of community members including courtship songs aimed at establishing institute of the family. The roles of this musical culture are not limited to one particular group; they are prevalent throughout the Southeast Asian region. One distinct aspect of Khab Tai Dam is improvisation whereby a loosely structured pattern of singing is dotted with rhyming and can be changed. Improvisation is a particular challenge for singers who must be witty in selecting words and fabricating story lines about courtships, livelihoods, or lifestyles.

Khab Tai Dam in Laos is also accompanied by pipe playing. The pipe is made from the *Hia* variety of bamboo and is called *Pap* pipe. It is about 20

centimeters long with six fingering holes for playing six melodies. The mouthpiece can be made from gold or silver. If gold is used, the melodies are likely softer and more pleasant, and although the silver mouthpieces produce harsher tones, they are more robust and last longer. Pipe melodies have to be in chorus with the vocal melody, but being more independent and flexible, they need not necessarily be in exact accordance with the melody being sung. Khab Tai Dam with pipes is found in the traditions of ethnic groups in Laos and Vietnam. In Vietnam, other woodwind, string and plucked instruments can be played together with the pipe. In Thailand, pipes or other Khab Tai Dam instruments used in rituals are not used in Khab Tai Dam for entertainment as they are regarded as sacred objects exclusively used in rituals (Singlor, personal communication, January 12, 2016; Thi Tuang, personal communication, December 19, 2015).

The musical components of the Khab Tai Dam for entertainment in Laos are similar to those in Vietnam, beginning with *Ha...Oi...* In Thailand, it begins with *Paeng Na Kai Muang Oy or Wa An Yei Yei*. Furthermore, Khab Tai Dam for entertainment is also called *Khab Sai Paeng*, which is not found in other areas.

Another characteristic of Khab Tai Dam that varies is the ending of each stanza. In Thailand the stanza ends with *Ho Ho O La O.....O* followed by a new stanza. In Laos and Vietnam, the stanza ends with *Oi* which is lengthened from *O*, along with the melody, until *I*. Despite this difference, Khab Tai Dam in all countries incorporates two supporting singers or chorus who sing at the end of each stanza when the main singer begins singing the next stanza. Figure 1 is a sample of musical notation which illustrates the stanza structure as well as compares the differences between introducing and closing of Khab Tai Dam in Thailand and Laos.



Figure 1 Musical notes comparing the different melodies between introducing and closing of Khab Tai Dam in Thailand and Laos.

skills. The time it takes to learn depends on the details of the rituals and memorization ability of the learner, ranging from a few days to five or six months (K. Watthonglue, personal communication, January 9, 2016). For the Tai Dam in all three countries the pipe is regarded as a sacred instrument which cannot be performed except for at certain rituals, so musicians are obliged to memorize the score during performances on those occasions. In Laos, a practice pipe called *Lao Noi* – a replica of the *Lao Luang* pipe used in the actual rituals – is used by pipe masters to practice the melodies memorized from actual performances of Khab Tai Dam at rituals (P. Singlor, personal communication, January 12, 2016).

Nowadays, Tai Dam people in the study areas have been affected by social changes with greater focus on the economic development of mainstream society. Tai Dam youth are more interested in economic progress and tend to look for jobs elsewhere to provide financial support for their families. The transmission of ritual singing has played a less significant role and shamans and pipe players are mainly old people. In some communities they have all passed away, so shamans and musicians are sought out in other communities to conduct the rituals. Besides the mainstream social factors affecting the transmission process, it is noted that the specific qualifications required of prospective shaman, and recognition of the pipe as a sacred object have created impediments to finding suitable learners in present-day society with its diverse alternatives for making a living.

When considering Khab Tai Dam transmission for rituals compared to that for entertainment, it was found that the latter enjoyed greater opportunities for transmission due to its loosely structured musical elements which enable the freely created musical components to be more easily learned and memorized. If the musical structures are mastered, players are able to practice on their own. Over the past three decades, singing transmission has occurred continuously for the reason that anyone with skills and a witty character to their singing can attract the attention of a prospective life partner. Furthermore, because the musical components of Khab Tai Dam for entertainment facilitate changes and adaptation, they can always be modified to suit contemporary contexts.

The Maintenance and Adaptation of Musical Components in Khab Tai Dam

It is useful to compare present and past in order to explore the process of ethnic identity maintenance through Khab Tai Dam in the midst of socio-cultural changes. An investigation of the musical-culture data from a historical perspective reveals social developments and factors affecting the maintenance and adaptation of the ethnic musical components.

Maintenance of the Musical Components

Although the Tai Dam residing in the study areas exist in rather different social contexts with certain aspects of their musical components changing accordingly, this study found that the common element of musical-culture transmission is the system of musical scale, which is an essential component of ethnic music. This system controls melodies of the music in each culture. In whichever direction the melody goes, it must follow the system. Thus, the system of musical scale enables unique and prominent musical “accents” to be created by each culture. It was found from this investigation that musical melodies of the Tai Dam in the study areas are under the same system called pentatonic system which consists of first tone (tonic), second tone (super tonic), third tone (mediant), fourth tone (dominant), and fifth tone (sub-dominant). The pentatonic system is also related to those of other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia.

Language is also an important part of Khab Tai Dam for conveying messages to listeners of the same culture. This linguistic distinction functions as a cultural symbol that clearly indicates ethnic identity. It was found that the themes of songs in the past served different social functions, such as soul soothing, courtship, or wedding. Another prominent musical feature of the songs is the improvised rhyming structures of the lyrics, a feature that has been maintained up to the present.

Adaptation of the Musical Aspects and Components

Changing social contexts resulting from capitalist economic development together with unpredictable political factors have led to musical

aspects and components of ethnic folksongs for entertainment undergoing some adaptation. In Luang Namtha Province, Laos, *Lam Phloen* melodies have been incorporated into traditional patterns. The bass tone and *Lam Ploen* rhythmic patterns in Lao culture have been included to add to the enjoyment factor. Furthermore, an electronic organ is often used to replace traditional instruments like gongs, *Korng* and *Sae*, to create the *Sae Tai* rhythmic pattern, which is a dance rhythm accompanied by Khab Tai Dam as illustrated in figure 3 (B. Kaewsithamma, personal communication, January 14, 2016).



Figure 3 The blending of Lam Ploen rhythm using an electone with Khab Tai Dam as adapted in Laos.

The combining of modern musical instruments with traditional ones has been done by other ethnic groups in Luang Namtha Province, with an aim to appeal to a younger audience. This is because the lyrics of traditional Khab Tai Dam are difficult to understand and only old people really appreciate the themes. This situation has given rise to a view that if one listens to conventional Khab Tai Dam, he/she would be regarded as old-fashioned. Therefore, young listeners prefer to listen to the ethnic songs played with a combination of contemporary musical instruments.

In Vietnam, there has not been any change in or addition to the musical components of Khab Tai Dam. However, new songs are created using popular modes of music such as lyrics featuring the livelihoods of ethnic people and romance. What is interesting is the change in communication. In the past, the songs were performed live with a situational role switching between singers and listeners. Such a form of communicating has changed these days by separating the singers and listeners and presenting in the form of a show. Thus, singers are regarded as artists, which has established a new and different status for them. Moreover, music videos are produced and filmed in studios portraying various aspects of ethnic life. The videos are

recorded as karaoke DVDs and distributed to other Tai Dam communities, and are very popular among the ethnic listeners.

In Thailand, there has been no change in the ethnic musical components or patterns of singing. Nevertheless, the role of Khab Tai Dam has changed from being a tool for courtship or the inculcation and cultivation of moral and ethical issues, to becoming a show of ethnic cultural conservation at annual festivals held in Tai Dam communities. Such displays are intended for the younger generations to help them understand and appreciate Khab Tai Dam as an essential part of their cultural heritage that should be cherished and conserved.

The Maintenance of the Ethnic Identity through Khab Tai Dam

Socio-cultural factors have obliged various ethnic groups to adapt or change aspects of their culture at different periods of time. These ethnic groups utilized different methods of adaptation in order to maintain their identity so as to be able to occupy social space in an increasingly multi-cultural society.

In 1962, the Lao Nationalistic Organization established policies on ethnic groups such that all animistic beliefs deemed inconvenient to or impeding upon national development must be eliminated. Animistic rituals, long passed down from generation to generation, had to be terminated in an attempt to create a solid cultural foundation for socialism (Hongsuwan, 2004). These state-sponsored initiatives suppressed the Sen rituals of the Tai Dam ethnic group as well as the animistic rituals of other ethnic groups in Laos. Nevertheless, rituals at the family and community levels could still be practiced and maintained (P. Singlor, personal communication, January 12, 2016). Likewise, the Tai Dam ethnic group in Vietnam encountered the same issues after the political change to communism. Sen rituals reflecting the power relationship at the local administrative level were officially prohibited from 1954 (Saiphan, 2004) and the state permitted them to be organized only during their New Year festival. This official sanction was an absolute use of state power to eliminate customs, cultures and other social activities, which were cultural symbols of the ethnic group (Pitiphat, 2000). Nevertheless, under such political pressure, the Tai Dam and other ethnic groups did manage to negotiate, through cultural symbols, to maintain their ethnic identities to this day.

There has been no absolute state power in Thailand prohibiting animistic ritual performances of ethnic groups but conversion to Buddhism proved to be pivotal in curtailing many animistic beliefs; though the Tai Dam continue to practice their animism with some adaptations to suit current social contexts. In addition, national social and economic development plans together with modernization rhetoric in Thai society, have become major change catalysts and a social value which designates ethnic groups as “others” in society (Ardsmiti, 2012). This led to the display of ethnic identity in public spaces being frowned upon and the consequential lessening of efforts to conserve and revive traditional practices. Nowadays, however, more public space is provided for minority ethnic groups to express their identity and the Tai Dam have seized on this opportunity to raise awareness of their culture in the Thai social context with the support of both the public and private sectors.

Nevertheless, in the face of dynamic changes in terms of politics and globalization, experienced by the Tai Dam in the areas under study, limitations are evident in their ability to adapt and maintain identity within their own cultural space. Much depends on their efficacy in creating a cultural conservation process.

The system of musical scale, language use and poetic rhyming of Khab Tai Dam are important evidence that the ethnic group in the study areas share common features, but with slight differences in Thailand. These features have become symbols for raising cultural awareness, shared historical memories, and unity among these groups. Although songs are prevalent in all ethnic cultures in this region, the musical components of the Tai Dam are symbols conveyed at the cultural level, and so prominent that they have become unique to the ethnic culture.

Under temporal conditions and a changing environment, the Tai Dam have created a process of cultural conservation through folksongs in order to maintain their identity in the contemporary social and political context. The process consists of two aspects: maintenance and adaptation of musical culture.

This investigation revealed that the ethnic group in the study areas has maintained their musical culture with different functions. Although musical aspects and components of traditional Khab Tai Dam are distinct in terms of melodies, the systems of musical scale, rhythms, and accompanying instruments,

the transmission process in the current social context has experienced limitations in three aspects. Firstly, traditional use of language is metaphorical in nature to express the beauty of the language, which is in contrast with language use in modern songs with direct and popular content. Secondly, those consuming traditional Khab Tai Dam are generally old-aged people; teenagers who listen to them are generally regarded as old-fashioned. Thirdly, there are restrictions on the qualifications of singers as well as on traditional musical patterns. New technology and changing attitudes have restricted the importance of conventional belief systems, resulting in rituals being performed less. The role of ritual singing or Khab Mod in modern society has been reduced as a result.

In contrast, the combining of conventional and modern musical aspects, as seen in the Khab Tai Dam in Laos, has brought it up-to-date with modern tastes and so able to continue to serve its traditional function in Tai Dam society. This process reflects the aesthetic value of the music and, at the same time, provides a space for young and modern audiences. In addition, the numerous roles of the Khab Tai Dam these days have ensured that the songs tend to be conserved for future generations. Moreover, it was found that this contemporary combination was partly initiated by outsiders, namely non-Tai Dam Laotians and is thus a phenomenon of musical cultural exchange between the minority ethnic group and those in the mainstream.

Cultural space is not a physical space, but rather, intellectual leeway to express ideas, ideologies, and cultures. It is important for managing power relationships between members of society and provides opportunities for debate, negotiation, and semantic contest through the process of changing relationships. This concept enables us to understand problems of cultural space management in an urban society linked to the movements of various groups (Kanjanaphan, 2005) and as such, the process of ethnic identity maintenance through Khab Tai Dam within new social contexts is related to identity movements of Tai Dam in three types of cultural space: ritual space, entertainment space, and public space.

Khab Tai Dam in the ritual called *Khab Mod* plays an important role in creating symbols via music. Singing and pipe playing in rituals awakens the ethnic spirituality to collectively recognize the sacredness of the rituals.

In addition, unique components of ritual music such as the various melodies, tone colors, and lyrics, enable the Tai Dam to understand the meanings of those sounds. For instance, when the tone colors of the Lao Luang pipe are low, it means that someone in the community is sick or a ritual is being performed. However, as rituals play a less significant role these days, singing in the ritual space has also been decreased. In Luang Namtha Province, there remain fewer than ten singers and pipe players so when a Sen ritual is performed, those in neighboring communities are invited. The situation in Thailand is even worse. It was found that there was only one singer and pipe player in Nakhon Pathom Province. This situation suggests that the ritual space of Tai Dam in the areas studies has been reduced due to a lack of ritual masters.

The combination of conventional and mainstream musical components in Khab Tai Dam has consistently occupied the entertainment space. Furthermore, Tai Dam youth have seen increasing opportunities to participate in conserving and creating musical symbols within this space, for example at wedding where electronic organs have been introduced to enhance the fun factor by playing Lao-style dance music, which is very popular in Luang Namtha Province. In such cases, though elements of the mainstream culture play a more prominent role in the entertainment space of the ethnic group, a negotiated syncretism of Khab Tai Dam together with Sae Tai strengthens the ethnic cultural symbols in this space. Moreover, the electronic organ has become an instrument for *Sae Tai*, which is a new form of ethnic musical culture. This is similar to the entertainment space available to the Tai Dam in Vietnam where conventional music has been modernized by taking advantage of digital technology to produce ready-made performance products within a new cultural space rather than the limited physical space in the community. In Thailand, it was found that cultural conservation activities of the Tai Dam are mostly in the form of demonstrations by elderly members able to perform the Khab Tai Dam reflecting past lifestyles, with the young generations showing less interest in conserving this ethnic cultural heritage.

The public space also provides an important cultural space for ethnic groups to express their identity and negotiate their existence. Khab Tai Dam in Laos is an interesting case study where a cultural fair for ethnic groups is

organized annually in Vientiane and is partly an expression of ethnic unity. Khab Tai Dam is performed together with *Sae Tai* by all participants holding hands and singing Tai Dam-based *Sae Tai*. The performances indicate that, in the public space of a multi-ethnic society, the status of Tai Dam identity is presented via musical culture during a transitional period. A constructive change of the musical components enables outsiders to better learn and understand the symbols observable in the musical components. The choice of Khab Tai Dam and *Sae Tai* to represent unity has become accepted and recognized as a symbol of cultural unity through music in the public space of multi-cultural, present-day Laos.

Conclusion and Discussion

This article has attempted to describe the process of ethnic identity maintenance of the Tai Dam ethnic group in a range of cultural contexts through an analysis of musical components as ethnic cultural symbols.

It was found from the investigation that Khab Tai Dam originally played a significant role in the traditional Tai Dam lifestyle in terms of ritual and entertainment music. A shaman, or *Mor Mod*, would perform the ritual music with pipe playing possibly accompanying certain rituals. Although Tai Dam exist in different cultural contexts in the areas studied, there were many common components, including strict conservation patterns of traditional musical components.

Nowadays, the role of ritual music has declined due to political and administrative concerns. In some areas, the right to perform rituals has been limited at the city level since rituals that strengthen ethnic awareness and promote ethnic identity are regarded as a threat to national security. Moreover, globalization has become a major influence on the popularity and significance of rituals due to the young now being formally educated and choosing to live and work away from their communities. As a consequence, the folk wisdom of the rituals has lost much of its relevance to the young and so fewer people are interested in performing and conserving the Khab Tai Dam in rituals.

Khab Tai Dam in rituals is considered as a space to create a shared awareness and recognition of cultural symbols through musical components

with strict and detailed steps that can only be perceived by members of the group. Although Khab Tai Dam has strengthened cultural awareness at the individual and community levels, conventional conservation and maintenance in the midst of changing social factors only serves to make the ritual less significant. This is because the constructed symbols apparent in the musical components have not been learned collectively as they were in the past. Furthermore, strict qualifications for the ritual master have become another factor restricting conservation efforts. As seen in these case studies, patterns of Khab Tai Dam in rituals have managed to be maintained while, at the same time, there is a dwindling number of ritual masters in all three areas.

The investigation also revealed changes to the musical components of Khab Tai Dam as an entertaining culture. In Laos, there has been a combining of musical components between traditional and modern instruments like electronic organs. The *Lam Phloen* rhythm, which is a part of mainstream Lao musical culture, has been incorporated into Khab Tai Dam with an aim to expand audienceship among young generations and those from different groups. The combination tends to maintain the ethnic musical culture more than conventional patterns. It was found that the contemporary Khab Tai Dam adds fun to ethnic festivals and this contemporary application of musical culture has been found in other Tai-Kadai ethnic groups, such as contemporary *Saw* in Lanna culture, *Mor Lum Sing* in northeastern Thailand, and contemporary *Khab Lue* in China. These contemporary adaptations have become popular among young ethnic people and have helped them maintain their respective ethnic identities until today.

In an age of information technology, the dissemination of ethnic music in digital format is extremely beneficial for ethnic musical culture as a means to enhance its value and expand audienceship to match that of mainstream popular music. Changes to the way culture-based music is disseminated, lyrics that describe their ethnic lifestyle, and the creation of new musical aesthetics, have enabled ethnic groups in diverse areas to share their cultures more easily, as in the cases of the Tai Dam groups in Laos and Vietnam. Other ethnic

groups in Asia and Southeast Asia have started to present their cultures in a digital media form, for instance, the Tai Lue ethnic group in Sipsongpanna Region, China, who produce their songs on VCD and disseminate them over the internet. Moreover, modern technology allows music videos to be easily produced and uploaded to the internet to attract attention to Tai Lue folksongs, like the Tai Dam in Vietnam have done.

In the Thai context, Khab Tai Dam as entertainment, contains less strict musical components than that used in rituals, but conventional musical components have also been retained. It was found that Khab Tai Dam generally does not play a more significant role in the Thai ethnic group lifestyle than in the past and its current role has in fact been reduced to merely demonstration at certain festivals or on special occasions.

Lessons from this investigation reveal that the conservation of conventional musical patterns and components have helped to maintain prominent symbols of the Tai Dam culture collectively and exclusively as perceived by Tai Dam people. However, social changes have forced changes to the ethnic music culture by combining symbols of mainstream and ethnic cultures, and consequently, this offers opportunities to negotiate public space through which to appreciate and engage in each other's musical offerings, ultimately leading to wider audienceship and the conservation of this ethnic cultural heritage.

Khab Tai Dam accompanied by pipe playing is part of a common culture shared by various ethnic groups in Asia and Southeast Asia and plays a role in both rituals and entertainment. With changing socio-cultural patterns, it is imperative for ethnic groups to adapt and adjust themselves in order to maintain their ethnic identities in increasingly multi-cultural societies and observe social conditions as they change so as to preserve the symbols that distinguish them. Lessons learned from the process of adaption and adoption will serve as a guide to the conservation of threatened music genres in the face of dynamic shifts in social patterns. The challenge is for ethnic groups in the Asian region to preserve their singing cultures as a symbol of identity in perpetuity as they have done historically for over 3,000 years.

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