



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transformations in the Ritual Music of the Khmer Ethnic Group in the Southern Area of Northeast Thailand

Chaiyawat Chaiyachartkittyos^{1*}, Prof. Dr. Chalernsak Pikulsri², Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jatupon Srimueng³

¹ Doctoral Student, Doctor of Philosophy Program in Musicology, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

² Doctor of Philosophy Program in Music, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

³ Graduate School, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

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The Khmer ethnic group in Thailand is one of the minority groups residing in the southern area of Northeast Thailand. They maintain traditions and beliefs that involve reverence for sacred entities, along with the performance of ritual music passed down through generations. This research aims to study the components of ritual music of the Khmer ethnic group, analyze their ritual music, and examine transformations in this music within the southern area of Northeast Thailand. The research employs a qualitative methodology, incorporating document analysis and fieldwork, including observations and interviews with local experts, musicians, and audiences. The findings are presented through descriptive analysis. The study reveals that the Khmer Piphat ensemble, a traditional musical ensemble, is used in various rituals of the Khmer ethnic group in the southern area of Northeast Thailand. These rituals include funeral ceremonies, elephant processions, Mamoud ceremonies, and traditional Likay performances in Sisaket, Surin, and Buriram provinces. It is believed that the performance of this music acts as a medium to communicate with sacred entities, signifying that descendants have arranged music to honor them. Key elements of the Khmer Piphat ensemble include instruments such as the Pi Nai, Ranat Ek, Ranat Thum (lower-pitched xylophone), Ranat Ek Lek (smaller metallophone), Ranat Thum Lek (larger and lower-pitched metallophone), Khong Wong Yai, Khong Wong Lek (a set of 18 tuned bossed gongs, smaller and higher in pitch), Taphon, and Klong That. These components reflect the cultural heritage of Khmer ritual music in the southern area of Northeast Thailand.

*Corresponding Author:

chaiyawat@kkumail.com

INTRODUCTION

The Khmer ethnic group in Thailand primarily consists of communities residing in the northeastern region of the country. They have a way of life, art, and culture that reflect simplicity while maintaining a distinctive cultural identity, particularly in their language. The Khmer language continues to be strongly preserved and passed down, serving as a prominent marker of their unique cultural heritage and truly reflecting the essence of the Khmer ethnic group (Pankhueankhat, 1988; Buddhisaro et al., 2023; Seedabut and Patpong, 2024; Klangrit et al., 2025).

The current settlement areas of the Khmer people in Thailand are primarily located in the provinces of Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani, with smaller populations in Nakhon Ratchasima and Maha Sarakham. Many of these groups originally migrated from Surin and Sisaket. Notably, Khmer settlements are predominantly situated between the Mun River and the Phanom Dong Rak mountain range, with only a small number residing north of the Mun River. Of the provinces where the *Kui* (Suay) people also live, Surin and Sisaket have the highest concentration of Khmer communities. This is attributed to the stronger cultural influence of the Khmer compared to the *Kui*,

who have rapidly assimilated into Khmer culture. Over time, most of the Kui population in Surin has been integrated into the Khmer, a group now referred to by Thais as “*Khmer Sung*” (Highland Khmer). This term likely derives from the geographic elevation of Khmer settlements in Thailand, which are higher than those in Cambodia. Consequently, the Khmer in Thailand are called “Highland Khmer,” while those in Cambodia are referred to as “Lowland Khmer” (Sriwisate, 1984; Sungthada, 1986; Renard, 2015; Vickery, 2017; Kampuansai et al., 2023).

Thailand shares a border of approximately 800 kilometers with the Kingdom of Cambodia to the east and northeast, marked by the Phanom Dong Rak mountain range, which serves as a natural boundary. There are several cross-border passages between the two countries, enabling interaction between people from past to present. This interaction has resulted in border provinces sharing similar ways of life, customs, traditions, and cultural elements, particularly language (Khmer) and beliefs. Pankhueankhat (1988) noted that a group of people resides in border provinces adjacent to Cambodia, including Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket, with scattered populations in Ubon Ratchathani, Maha Sarakham, Roi Et, Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Nayok, Chanthaburi, Chachoengsao, Prachinburi, and Trat. Smaller populations are also found in Ratchaburi and Nakhon Pathom. Most of this group lives in Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket, which border Cambodia’s provinces of Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear, Banteay Meanchey, and Siem Reap. These people refer to themselves as *Khmer*, the same term used by Cambodians to describe themselves. However, in Thailand, various terms are used to describe this group, including Thai Khmer, Thai-Khmer, Thai-Khmer people, Thai people of Khmer descent, Khmer Thinthai (Khmer native to Thailand), Thai-Khmer ethnic group, and Khmer native to Thailand (Srisawas, 2010; Kamsopa, 2018; Sukmasuang et al., 2022; Patnukao, 2024).

The Khmer people hold strong beliefs in the supernatural and the mysterious, integrating these beliefs into their daily lives from the past to the present. This ethnic group has a long history of migration and settlement in the southern area of Northeast Thailand, bringing their cultural beliefs with them as an essential part of their way of life. Local villagers often pass down these beliefs orally, embedding them in rituals and traditions. When illness occurs, they believe in seeking help from sacred entities to alleviate the patient’s symptoms. Rituals involving spirit possession often include music as an integral element to enhance the completeness of the ceremony. The music not only enriches the ritual but also provides a sense of joy and emotional relief to participants. Villagers have long engaged in singing, dancing, and organizing cultural processes related to spirit possession rituals for healing purposes, preserving these practices as part of their traditional way of life from the past to the present (Phanwarathorn, 2016; Wongwilatnurak, 2018; Jiaviriyaboonya, 2022; Prastowo, 2023).

The music created for rituals in each locality varies due to the diverse ethnic groups in the region, including the *Khmer*, *Kui*, *Lao*, and *Yer* (a tribe migrated from northern China) (Siebenhütter, 2023; Srichampa, 2024). The art and culture of this area reflect a blend of these distinct cultural traditions. Consequently, this cultural diversity gives rise to a variety of rituals and ceremonies. One example is the ritual of spirit possession, known as “*Mamoud*,” practiced by Thai people of Khmer descent in Surin. This ancient ritual is believed to invoke sacred powers that help alleviate the symptoms of illness (Kanvicha, 2016; Ruangbut and Binson, 2017; Tongterm et al., 2024).

Currently, many organizations prioritize the study and collection of cultural data related to the Khmer ethnic group. Cultural conservation-focused tourism sites have been established in various areas, emphasizing the importance of preserving Khmer cultural heritage. The study of Khmer music is a significant branch of cultural research that warrants further concrete exploration. Khmer musical traditions and their roles in rituals are still practiced in local communities today, although their prevalence has diminished due to transformations in modern Thai society. The researcher is particularly interested in studying Khmer music and its cultural dimensions, recognizing its importance for contemporary teaching and learning processes. Moreover, there is growing interest among scholars and researchers in exploring or conducting studies on Khmer music.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term “Isan” and its cultural significance

The term “*Isan*” refers to the northeastern region of Thailand, a name that has been used to the present day and is widely recognized as a region rich in artistic and cultural beauty. Over time, the development of the area has led to an abundance of natural resources in many parts, solidifying the habitual use of the term “*Isan*,” which aptly aligns with the cultural context of the region. The people of Isan, residing on the Korat Plateau, comprise various ethnic groups, including the Khmer, *Suay* (Kui), *Saek* (an ethnic group of Mon-Khmer origin living in northeastern Thailand and central Laos), *Yor*, *Phu Thai* (a tribe native to Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, speaking a Southwestern Tai language), *Kaso* (So) (a Mon-Khmer tribe native to northeastern Thailand), and *Thai Korat* (a Thai-Lao ethnic group native to Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand). While each group has its unique characteristics, their way of life is deeply rooted in traditional customs known as *Hit Ban Khong Mueang and Hit Sip Song Khong Sip Si* (Twelve Traditions and Fourteen Customs). These traditions emphasize mutual support, social participation, and regular involvement in merit-making and communal activities, fostering harmony and peaceful coexistence of these diverse communities (Sriwisate, 1984; Sungthada, 1986; Boonpok, 2021; Topoonyanont, 2023; Uttaro et al., 2024).

Isan folk music

The folk music of Isan is unique and distinctly different from that of other regions in Thailand (Polhong, 2022; Khuntajan, 2024). Several scholars have studied and analyzed Isan folk music, emphasizing its unique characteristics and cultural significance.

Rungrueang (2003) defines regional music as the music of a specific area or culture that transcends physical boundaries. This type of music is deeply appreciated, understood, and meaningful of individuals within the culture. Outsiders, while they may appreciate it to some extents, often do so in a limited capacity. For example, in Lanna folk music, when Lanna people play the *Pi* (reed pipe), *Sueng* (traditional northern Thai lute), perform *Joi* (northern Thai folk singing), *Sor* (fiddle performance), *Khao* (poetic recitation), or *Hum* (melodic chanting), and even *Lae* (chant or deliver sermons in a melodic style), only those within the Lanna culture can fully grasp its meaning without requiring translation, interpretation, or explanation. Outsiders, however, often require extensive explanations, yet even with such efforts, they may still fail to comprehend the true intrinsic meaning. Similarly, if Lanna people listen to Isan folk music, such as *Mor Lam* (traditional singing and dancing in Laos and Isan) or *Mor Khaen* (a bamboo mouth organ performance), although some words may share similar meanings, they still require explanations. The cultural gap widens even further when individuals from vastly different cultural contexts, such as the Lanna and Isan people, experience southern Thai performances like *Nora* (dance drama) or *Bok* (traditional songs) of Southern Thailand. These performances involve not only distinctly different musical styles but also linguistic variations, making interpretation even more challenging. Despite detailed explanations, the deeper intrinsic meanings of the music often remain elusive to those outside the culture (Phukarn, 2001).

Sungthada (1986) categorized Isan folk songs based on the timing and occasions for their performance. The major categories are as follows: 1) recreational songs performed for enjoyment during festivals or special occasions, 2) ritual songs used in ceremonies such as *Phawet* merit-making (a Buddhist ceremony featuring sermons and storytelling), *Lae* (traditional Isan chanting), and *Bai Sri Su Khwan* (a traditional blessing ceremony) for various events, and 3) lullabies sung by villagers to soothe their children to sleep and prevent fussiness. The content and melodies of these songs vary depending on the locality.

In addition to categorizing Isan folk music based on timing and occasions, it can also be classified according to cultural groups associated with the musical traditions found in different areas of Isan. Phukarn (2001) divided Isan folk music into three main cultural groups: the *Mor Lam* group, the *Kantrum* group, and the Korat group. These groups are widely recognized and represent the traditional performance culture of the Isan people, categorized based on the distinctive features of the music and the social culture of each locality. This classification aligns with Rueangdet (1986), who categorized Isan folk songs into three groups based on linguistic culture: 1) *Lum Mu* (traditional Isan folk singing), *Mor Lam Rueang* (narrative-style folk performance), and *Mor Lam Ching Choo* (humorous folk singing with themes of love and infidelity), which are highly popular of communities where Lao is the local language; 2) Korat songs, a well-known folk music style originating in Nakhon Ratchasima and commonly enjoyed in neighboring provinces; and 3) *Kantrum* songs (traditional Khmer-Thai folk music with lively rhythms) and other forms of *Jariang* (traditional Khmer-Thai

singing, often narrative or ceremonial), sung in the Khmer language and prevalent in southern Isan, particularly in parts of Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket provinces (Kanvicha, 2016; Kamsopa, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, wherein the researcher gathers knowledge from academic texts, documents, research studies, and other related materials. Additionally, data collection involved fieldwork, during which the researcher conducted detailed observations of the target group. Key methods included participant observation, individual in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The analysis emphasizes logical reasoning rather than numerical data. The research methodology and process are outlined as follows.

Personnel

This research focuses on the Khmer ethnic group in communities that continue to maintain their way of life and cultural beliefs, particularly regarding rituals that incorporate music. The study involves individuals residing in geographically defined areas based on Thailand's current administrative divisions, specifically in the southern part of Northeast Thailand (Isan). A purposive sampling method was employed, targeting the following groups:

Academic experts

This group includes scholars with expertise in Khmer ethnicity, providing information on the historical background and cultural resilience of the Khmer community. Additionally, it involves experts in the arts and culture of the Khmer ethnic group. Fieldwork in southern Isan involved interviews with academics capable of communicating effectively with villagers to gather initial information on Khmer ethnicity and the local context. Key informants include:

Asst. Prof. Dr. Asok Thaichantharak, Faculty of Arts Education, Buriram Rajabhat University.

Dr. Phongsapich Kaewkul, Faculty of Ethnomusicology, Srinakharinwirot University.

Mr. Pachara Rampaneenil, Ceremony Officer, Cultural Office of Surin Province.

Practitioners

This group consists of local villagers who perform ritual music within the Khmer ethnic community and individuals involved in various ceremonies. Ritual musicians in southern Isan were observed and recorded as they performed and demonstrated ritual music, enabling the transcription of ceremonial music into Thai musical notation. Key groups include:

Pi Phat Ensemble, Ban Ta-ud: Ta-ud Subdistrict, Sisaket Province.

Pi Phat Ensemble, Wat Phrom Kru Noi: Nai Mueang Subdistrict, Mueang District, Surin Province.

Pi Phat Ensemble, Ban Sawai: Sawai Subdistrict, Mueang District, Surin Province.

Pi Phat Ensemble, Ban Yawuek: Yawuek Subdistrict, Chumphon Buri District, Surin Province.

Pi Phat Ensemble, Ban Ta Mul: Ban Lam Duan, Lumpuk Subdistrict, Mueang District, Buriram Province.

Pi Phat Ensemble, Silp Sanchai: Lumpuk Subdistrict, Mueang District, Buriram Province.

Pi Phat Ensemble, Dong Dok Kradang: Mueang District, Buriram Province.

Informants

This group includes individuals within the Khmer ethnic community who contribute to its cultural practices and can provide insights into the social and cultural context of Khmer traditions. Key informants include:

Lecturer Bancha Nuansai, Faculty of Social Studies, Buriram Rajabhat University.

Lecturer Sujitra Yangnok, Faculty of Social Development, Buriram Rajabhat University.

Lecturer Mitta Sapphut, Ubon Ratchathani University.

Instruments for Data Collection

This research utilized the following instruments for data collection:

Surveys

Surveys were used to collect basic geographical and cultural information related to the southern Isan area.

Interviews

The interviews were divided into three types:

1. **Unstructured interviews:** These interviews did not involve fixed questions. In some cases, only key topics were predefined, allowing flexibility in the order and content of the questions. This open-ended approach enabled the researcher to explore freely and achieve the research objectives. Data collected from unstructured interviews is not typically used for hypothesis testing or direct comparison but can inform the development of structured interviews for subsequent use.
2. **Structured interviews:** These interviews involved a set of pre-established questions asked in the same sequence and format to all respondents. This method ensured consistency, allowed the researcher to remain focused on specific objectives, and facilitated data comparison across respondents.
3. **Focus groups:** Data was gathered through discussions with local Pi Phat ensemble musicians who provided insights into the study's focus areas. Focus groups, consisting of 6–12 participants, were organized based on the specific rituals being studied.

Observation

Observation was employed to document behaviors and phenomena during the study. The researcher used methods such as note-taking, audio recording, and video recording to capture data effectively. Observation was categorized into two types:

1. **Participant observation:** The researcher actively participated in the events or activities being observed. This could involve complete participation, where the researcher fully integrated into the group and its activities, or partial participation, where the researcher selectively engaged with the group to build rapport while maintaining some distance. Complete participation ensured that participants were unaware of being observed, leading to natural behavior. Partial participation allowed the researcher to establish connections while maintaining objectivity.
2. **Non-participant observation:** The researcher observed participants' behaviors from an external perspective without engaging in the activities. Observations were conducted from within or outside the ritual area. Depending on the context, participants might or might not be aware they were being observed.

Data collection

The data collection process for this research was designed to align with its objectives, ensuring that the information gathered fully addressed the research questions. Data collection was conducted through two primary methods:

1. Data collection from documents

The researcher gathered information from a variety of recorded sources relevant to the study. These included materials from governmental organizations, educational institutions, books, academic texts, research papers, and online or internet-based resources. The goal was to integrate data related to the Khmer ethnic group in southern Isan into the research framework.

2. Data collection from fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted in the provinces of Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket. The researcher visited each *Pi Phat* ensemble at least three times to ensure comprehensive data collection. Observations were made during ceremonies where the ensembles performed, providing detailed and accurate information.

Data collection during fieldwork utilized instruments such as surveys, interviews, observation notes, and audio and video recordings.

The fieldwork focused on the musical components of ritual performances, analyzing elements such as the structure of the music, its roles, compositions, and changes in ritual music within the Khmer ethnic group. The data collection instruments included:

3. **Surveys:** Surveys were used to gather basic geographical and cultural information about the southern Isan region. The collected data provided insights into the social and cultural context of Khmer communities in Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket. Additionally, photographs were taken to document the general context of the area and the way of life within Khmer communities, serving as a visual aid in describing local traditions and related rituals.
4. **Interviews:** Interviews aimed to capture responses from performers and individuals involved in ritual music performances. Respondents either provided written answers in questionnaires or had their responses recorded by the interviewer.
5. **Observations:** Observational data were recorded on observation sheets. The researcher documented insights gained from participating in or observing rituals, whether as a musician or as an audience member during ritual music performances.

Data organization and analysis

The data organization and analysis for this research were conducted in alignment with the research objectives. The process involved the following steps:

Data Organization

Data from primary sources: Information from academic texts, related documents, and fieldwork was systematically categorized according to the research objectives to ensure completeness and clarity.

Data from research instruments: Data collected using research tools were summarized and organized into categories based on the instruments used, laying the groundwork for subsequent qualitative analysis.

Data verification: The completeness of the data was verified by examining aspects such as individuals, time, and location.

Data analysis

Data analysis in this research involved two approaches: document analysis and field data analysis.

Document analysis: This approach applied theoretical concepts relevant to the research to verify the accuracy of the data.

Field data analysis: Field data were analyzed to draw conclusions through qualitative analysis, using the following techniques:

Typology and taxonomy: Data were categorized and systematized into groups, such as the history of the Khmer ethnic group, current conditions, beliefs, and musical components in rituals.

Analytic induction: Events and occurrences were analyzed to identify common conclusions.

Constant comparison: Data were compared with similar events or rituals to identify similarities and differences.

Componential analysis: Data were broken down into components, such as the musical elements within rituals, for detailed analysis.

Sociology imaginary: Data were analyzed from alternative perspectives, such as the attitudes of local residents who did not participate in the rituals, to explore different angles and interpretations of the findings.

Presentation of research findings

This research employed a qualitative approach to study the key musical elements used in the rituals of the Khmer ethnic group in southern Isan, Thailand. The findings were presented through descriptive analysis in alignment with the research objectives. The presentation included visual aids such as images, maps, tables, and graphs to enhance clarity and comprehension.

RESULTS

This article is part of the research titled “**The Changes in the Ritual Music of the Khmer Ethnic Group in the Southern Area of Northeast in Thailand.**” The study employs a qualitative research approach, collecting data from both documents and fieldwork. The gathered data were analyzed, synthesized, and systematically organized into a descriptive narrative format. The research aims to explore and achieve the objectives outlined in the study.

The role of the folk Pi Phat ensemble of the Khmer Ethnic group in Southern Isan

The folk *Pi Phat* ensemble plays a significant role in the lives of Khmer-speaking communities in southern Isan. With its long-standing tradition, the music not only conveys emotions and thoughts but also reflects the worldview and values of the Khmer-speaking people. As a result, the *Pi Phat* ensemble has been deeply respected and embraced within the Khmer ethnic group in southern Isan for generations. Regardless of the type of ritual or ceremony, the role of *Pi Phat* music remains an integral part of the cultural life of Thai people of Khmer descent.

The role and function in the Mamoud ritual

The *Mamoud* ritual has been passed down and practiced for generations. Elders recount that it is performed to heal individuals suffering from illnesses that conventional treatments fail to cure. It is believed that making a vow to perform the *Mamoud* ritual can lead to recovery. The purpose of the ritual is to uncover the reason behind the illness, identify its cause, determine who or what is responsible, and understand their desires. The ritual involves spirit possession, which can be performed by the patient, their children, or their grandchildren. However, *Mamoud* rituals are not conducted as a regular tradition and are not tied to specific months or years. They must, however, take place on a Thursday.



Figure 1: Roles in the Mamoud ritual

The *Mamoud* ritual (spirit possession) is accompanied by a Khmer *Pi Phat* ensemble, which plays music during the ceremony. The ensemble typically includes instruments such as the *Ranat Ek* (alto xylophone), *Khong Wong Yai* (a set of 16 tuned bossed gongs), *Pi Nai* (a type of Thai traditional reed instrument), *Klong That* (a large barrel drum), *Taphon* (a barrel-shaped drum), *Ching* (small cymbals), *Chab* (larger cymbals), and *Krab* (wooden rhythm clappers).



Figure 2: Five aggregates for the Mamoud teacher ceremony

The Teacher Worship Ceremony (*Bai Sri Su Khwan*) of the Tamul Folk *Pi Phat* Ensemble is a ritual that has been passed down through generations since the time of their ancestors. It is transmitted orally through memorization, storytelling, and observation, followed by practice. This ritual is performed before every musical performance as a gesture of respect toward the music teachers and mentors who imparted their knowledge. It signifies gratitude, acknowledges their guidance, and seeks blessings for a smooth and auspicious performance. The ceremony is conducted at the location where the music is to be performed.

The ritual items for the Teacher Worship Ceremony consist of 26 baht in money, five cones of auspicious flowers, incense sticks, candles, one large bottle of rice whisky, one large bottle of orange juice, and one white cloth.

Note: For funerals, an additional offering of a pig's head is included. For general auspicious events, only the items listed above are used.

Ritual procedures

The ritual conducted by the Tamul *Pi Phat* ensemble in Buriram Province follows specific steps and offerings. The ensemble's customary fee is 26 baht, which the host provides before the ceremony begins. Once the payment is made, the most senior musician leads the ritual to honor the music teachers and mentors. This includes lighting incense and candles, pouring offerings of rice whisky and sweetened water, preparing betel nuts and areca leaves, and lighting a cigarette as part of the tribute to the teachers who imparted their musical knowledge. The senior musician then uses the offered whisky to anoint the faces of the *Taphon* and *Klong That* drums, symbolically informing the spirits of the musical instruments about the ceremony. Afterward, the senior musician prepares holy water (*Nam Mon*), which is sprinkled on the instruments to bless them for the performance.



Figure 3: Musicians performing in the Mamoud ritual

After completing the Teacher Worship Ceremony, the musicians arrange the ensemble to perform a prelude at 10:00 a.m. while awaiting the arrival of Buddhist monks for a religious ceremony at 11:00 a.m. This ritual is conducted to dedicate merit to the deceased and to inform them of the *Mamoud* ritual. It involves inviting ancestral spirits (*Phi Pu, Ya, Ta, Yai* – grandfather, grandmother, and other forebears) to perform traditional healing practices based on beliefs passed down through generations. These spirits are called upon to help heal descendants suffering from unexplained illnesses.



Figure 4: Ritual leader performing the teacher worship ceremony to inform the ancestors

The *Mamoud* ritual, also known as *Phi Mor*, begins with the host preparing the venue, typically in an open area of their home. The setup resembles a general merit-making ceremony, with food and drinks arranged for participants. Additionally, a designated space in the yard is prepared for performing the ritual according to traditional beliefs. Guests are invited to join, and villagers attend in large numbers, demonstrating their faith and reverence for this ritual performance. They actively participate in the ceremony, offering blessings and wishing the patient a full recovery.



Figure 5: Dance performance in the Mamoud ritual

The music and dance performances for the *Mamoud* ritual typically begin around 12:00 p.m. and are accompanied by musical pieces as directed by the ritual leader (*Mae Mod*), who communicates the preferences of the ancestral spirits (*Phi Pu* and *Phi Ta*). The spirits may request specific songs to be played while participants continue dancing. Commonly performed songs include *Thayoi* (a traditional Thai folk song with a gradual, flowing rhythm), *Song Chan* (a two-beat traditional Thai melody), and lively *Luk Thung* (energetic Thai country music blending folk and modern styles). The musicians play continuously until around 4:00 or 5:00 a.m., depending on the host's decision on when the performance should conclude.

The role of the *Pi Phat* ensemble in ritual music involves extended performances, with most songs featuring repetitive cycles to accompany the ritual leader (*Mae Mod*) during the dance. The *Mae Mod* dance ritual blends two significant art forms: music and Thai traditional dance (*Nattasilp*), locally referred to in Khmer as *Rueam* (traditional dance). The dance in the *Mae Mod* ritual is characterized by expressive freedom, allowing participants to convey emotions and movements without strict limitations, although some shared movements are performed collectively. Through participatory observation, the researcher found that the *Pi Phat* ensemble often plays short, simple, and easily comprehensible songs, with the *Klong That* and *Taphon* drums setting the rhythm to create an atmosphere of enjoyment and excitement.

DISCUSSION

The study titled “**The Changes in the Ritual Music of the Khmer Ethnic Group in the Southern Area of Northeast in Thailand**” is a qualitative research project. It involves the collection of data from documents and fieldwork, which were analyzed, synthesized, and systematically organized into a descriptive narrative. The study aims to: 1) examine the structure and role of the *Pi Phat* ensemble of the Khmer ethnic group in the southern area of Northeast Thailand, 2) analyze the musical compositions used in the rituals of the Khmer ethnic group in the southern area of Northeast Thailand, and 3) investigate the cultural changes in ritual music of the Khmer ethnic group in the southern area of Northeast Thailand. The findings of the study are presented as follows:

The Form and Role of the Pi Phat Ensemble of the Khmer Ethnic Group in Southern Isan

The musical components of the rituals performed by the Khmer ethnic group in southern Isan, Thailand, consist of key elements such as instruments, sound systems, ensemble arrangements, and compositions. These components are integral to the significant rituals of the Khmer ethnic group in this region (Kanvicha, 2016; Jamnongsarn, 2022; Champadaeng et al., 2023). Based on the researcher's investigation and collaboration with government agencies, it was found that in Nam Yuen District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, the *Pi Phat* ensemble is no longer used in rituals, with string ensembles being utilized instead. However, the *Pi Phat* ensemble continues to play a role in ritual performances in the provinces of Sisaket, Surin, and Buriram (Phukarn, 2001; Nicolas, 2021; Ray, 2021). The research findings are summarized as follows:

The role of the Pi Phat ensemble of the Khmer ethnic group in Southern Isan

Roles in funeral rituals

Based on fieldwork conducted with *Pi Phat* ensembles used in funeral ceremonies, including the *Pi Phat* ensemble from Ban Ta-Ut, Khukhan District, Sisaket Province, Kru Noi's *Pi Phat* ensemble from Surin Province, and the *Pi Phat* ensemble from Ban Poidoen, Kasang District, Buriram Province, the roles and functions of these ensembles are largely similar. The music follows the activities outlined by the host in accordance with the cultural traditions of the Khmer ethnic group. From the beginning

of the ceremony, the *Pi Phat* ensemble plays continuously, day and night, until the procession to the temple. Of the Khmer ethnic group, it is customary to keep the deceased at home for merit-making before using the *Pi Phat* ensemble to accompany the funeral procession to the temple for cremation. The role of the *Pi Phat* ensemble in funeral rituals of the Khmer ethnic group in southern Isan is consistent across communities (Sadao, 2019; Baer, 2023; Ploymong et al., 2024).

Roles and functions in the Mamoud ritual

Based on the researcher's fieldwork and interviews with elderly residents of Bulamduan Nuea village, Mueang District, Buriram Province, the *Mamoud* ritual was described as a ceremony rooted in the belief and faith in healing through ritual practices. It is performed when conventional medical treatments fail to cure an illness. The ritual includes *Sa-Eng* performances or dances (traditional Kui dance and music), which are believed to aid in the patient's recovery. In addition to serving as a means of healing, *Sa-Eng* is also performed as part of a vow made to recover from an illness. However, the ritual is not conducted during Buddhist Lent (*Khao Phansa*). The ceremony begins at dusk, with the ritual area beautifully decorated and offerings carefully prepared. The ritual involves spirit possession, locally referred to as *Long Thaen* (a traditional ritual to worship deities or spirits), during which participants perform dances accompanied by ritual music (Phanwarathorn, 2016; Ruangbut and Binson, 2017).

The role of music played on elephant back

In Thatum District, Surin Province, the role of the *Pi Phat* ensemble on elephant back reflects a blending of the cultures of the Kui, Lao, and Khmer ethnic groups. Since the Khmer population predominates in this area of southern Isan, Khmer *Pi Phat* musicians play a significant role in performing music during rituals involving elephants. Playing *Pi Phat* music on elephant back is typically part of ceremonies hosted by wealthier individuals who can afford to include elephants in their processions. This practice is often observed in traditional ordination ceremonies, where elephants are prominently featured in the parade. The music performed includes procession songs such as *Krao Nok* (a traditional Thai folk song for storytelling), *Cherd* (lively Thai ceremonial music), *Sroi Pleng* (a melodic Thai folk song with lyrical beauty), and others (Srisawas, 2010; Narkkong, 2022; Ratchatakortrakoon, 2022).

The role of the Pi Phat ensemble in Likay performances

Based on fieldwork and interviews with Likay performers and musicians who use local *Pi Phat* ensembles to accompany their performances, particularly with the Phornphop Noppakun troupe in Prakhon Chai District, Buriram Province, it was found that the *Pi Phat* ensemble typically includes the *Ranat Ek* (alto xylophone), *Taphon* (barrel-shaped drum), and *Klong That* (large barrel drum). These instruments play a role in accompanying the singing, starting with *Rachnikloeng* (a southern Thai Likay influenced by Malay-Javanese culture) and transitioning to *Song Chan* (a two-beat traditional melody) or *Luk Thung* (Thai country music) songs. In the opening sequence (*Ork Khaek*: a traditional Thai opening performance showcasing respect, blessings, and skill), the role of the *Pi Phat* ensemble resembles that of central Thai Likay performances. However, there is a variation in the *Pi Phat* music used by the Kluay Hom troupe in Prakhon Chai District, Buriram Province, where additional instruments are incorporated. This adaptation requires adjustments to the sound system to blend with modern instruments, though the *Pi Phat* ensemble continues to accompany the singing as before (Srisantisuk, 2009; Meelertsom, 2021; Senamontree et al., 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the researcher emphasizes the importance of collecting field data to ensure that the information aligns with the research objectives and serves as crucial evidence documented through written records. In addition to research outcomes derived from interviews, photographs, and audio recordings of musicians and artists, it is essential to support and promote the preservation of the musical elements used in rituals. Efforts should be made to present ritual music through various methods, including technological media and oral storytelling, to ensure its preservation and continued transmission to future generations.

The transmission of *Pi Phat* ritual music among the Khmer people should be supported by the government through the promotion of teaching and learning processes in educational institutions.

Local artists and community scholars should be encouraged to participate in educational initiatives, sharing their experiences with youth in schools on a continuous basis. Opportunities should be provided for young people to engage with and experience local traditional activities. Promoting the teaching and practice of music serves as a means of preserving and fostering the creation of locally distinctive musical instruments, as traditional knowledge in crafting these instruments is gradually fading. Supporting the production of musical instruments also has significant economic implications, creating jobs and generating income to strengthen local communities.

Future research suggestions include studying the transmission processes of traditional Pi Phat ensemble performances used in Khmer rituals, as well as examining the production and creation processes of musical instruments unique to Khmer communities. Additionally, conducting a comparative study of the musical elements within the local culture of Khmer communities in southern Isan, Thailand, and neighboring countries is recommended.

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