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“MARK-KUB-KAB” in Isan Cultural Performing Arts

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Abstract

This study was conducted by means of the qualitative research methodology and ethnomusicology with the aims to 1) investigate the history of Mark-Kub-Kab, and 2) explore the roles of Mark-Kub-Kab in Isan cultural performing arts. The findings revealed the following:

1) “Mark-Kub-Kab” is a percussion instrument made of hardwood and featured in 2 varieties: short and long. Its history has not been evidently documented. The performance has no fixed pattern, depending more on occasions and the performers’ wits and improvisation. Mark-Kub-Kab is played in traditional local festivals and has been integrated into Isan cultural performing arts such as Mor Lam Klon, Nang Pramothai (Isan shadow play), Mor Lam Plern, and Pong Lang bands.

2) Mark-Kub-Kab features in 5 types of performances: 1) Local performances, 2) Mor Lam Klon performances, 3) Nang Pramothai performances, 4) Lam Plern performances, and 5) Pong Lang performances.

Keywords: Mark-Kub-Kab, folk performance

Introduction

Isan musical instruments can be divided into plucked string instruments, bowed string instruments, percussion instruments and woodwind instruments. These instruments are played for entertainment as well as in rituals according to the beliefs of the local people in different areas. Percussion instruments, in particular, have played a role that is closely connected to the lives of Isan people from the olden days. For example, an instrument in the shape of a wooden stick (Kroh) was drummed as a call for a meeting or a signal for news, and a drum was used as a military signal to call for an army before a battle, as a signal of a meeting, and as an announcement of news. (Surat Warangrat, 1986: 113) Percussion instruments consist of both melodic and rhythmic instruments. In Isan, percussion instruments feature different types of drums as well as wooden percussion instruments such as Kroh, Khor Lor, and Krub.

These instruments are related to rituals and livelihood, reflecting games and beliefs that show the ways of life and the fertility of the land in Isan society. (Pranee Wongthet, 1985: 224-324) Percussion and rhythm instruments are regarded as the world's oldest instruments. Asian percussion instruments can be categorized according to their shapes and characteristics into 11 types: chime, bell, gong, Kroh or Kho Lor, xylophone, stone bell, cymbal, Krub, and scraped instruments. In addition, Asian people often include leather percussion instruments in the category of percussion instruments. (Malm, 1977: 91-14)

Mark-Kub-Kab is a percussion instrument used as part of the rhythm section in performances in Isan. A preliminary survey has indicated that it is played to accompany Mor Lam performances called "Mor Lam Kub Kab" (Charoenchai Chonphairot, 1983), to accompany Nang Pramothai performances, to accompany a Pong Lang band, and to be part of Nang Hai performances. Mark-Kub-Kab is an ancient performance with no evident record of its history. At present, Mark-Kub-Kab can be performed locally on all occasions and in all places, generally in traditional festivals for merit making in Isan. Mark-Kub-Kab acts as a colorful rhythm section whose performers can be both male and female.

Although it was originated at a local level with no fixed performance pattern, Mark-Kub-Kab has started to play a more prominent role as an established performance, and its movements have recently been documented more clearly and systematically as a performing art. Nowadays, Mark-Kub-Kab is very popular in Isan folk bands, especially in Pong Lang bands where it is performed together with Nang Hai. In addition, it is performed in other types of performances as mentioned earlier, but the contexts and details of those performances are still unclear.

Due to its significance shown above, the researchers were interested in studying Mark-Kub-Kab in the Isan culture in terms of its history and roles in folk performances.

Objective of the Study

To study the history and roles of Mark-Kub-Kab in Isan cultural performing arts.

Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative study employing the research methodology of ethnomusicology and focusing on field data collection as the main source of research data. The research procedure is as follows:

1. The researchers selected the study area in Isan, focusing on Isan folk performances, conducted a preliminary field data collection and used the data to select the sample group with the advice from experts. The sample group of Isan folk performances included Mor Lam, Nang Pramothai and Pong Lang performances.

2. When the area and sample group had been specified, the researchers designed a questionnaire based on the objective of the study. After the questionnaire was checked and approved by experts, it was used as a tool for data collection.

3. The researchers planned the field data collection based on the objective of the study.

4. The researchers categorized and analyzed the data from the fieldwork and documentary study based on the objective of the study before having the data and the analysis checked by the personnel involved in the fieldwork and the experts.

5. The researchers corrected the data according to the suggestions of the experts and prepared the data for presentation.

Results of the Study

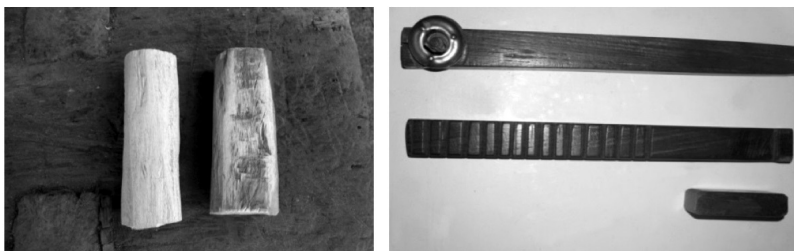
The results of the study reveal the following:

1. History of Mark-Kub-Kab

In the old days, Mark-Kub-Kab was not a main musical instrument and was regarded more as a common toy. Since the rural societies needed

entertainment, often in the form of singing, to relieve stress from work, Mark-Kub-Kab played an important part in this aspect of the local life since the ancient days. To make singing more fun, a percussion instrument was generally needed to keep the rhythm and to accompany the singing, since a melodic instrument would have required more musical skills from the players. Singing, however, could be performed from memory, the lyrics composed based on surrounding environments and expressed in words. Singing was a musical performance preceding the invention of any musical instruments and, therefore, was prevalent in a person's life since babyhood (e.g. in lullabies), requiring no special practice. Likewise, Mark-Kub-Kab, acting as a percussion instrument accompanying the singing, required no special training. Moreover, it could easily be made from local materials. In the past, when the people rested from farm work, they sang and kept the rhythm by hitting sticks together, having no other instrument. By doing this, the singing became more entertaining.

Isan people have known and made use of “Krub” since the old days. The instrument controls the rhythm of a song. In the past, it was made from local or recycled materials. It could be assumed that Mark-Kub-Kab was made in a similar way, possibly from “spokes of cartwheels” which featured a long shape like that of Mark-Kub-Kab and were made from hardwood suitable to produce the “Kub-Kab” sounds. Nevertheless, this was merely one of the possibilities since Isan people could easily make the instrument by cutting and sanding a piece of old wood into the desirable shape.



Picture 1: “Mark-Kub-Kab”. “Mai San” (Short) and “Mai Yao” (Long).

(Picture by Noppon Chaiyason, 2014).

Mark-Kub-Kab has been part of the Isan cultural performing arts since the old days, starting as a folk performance in festivals or traditional local merit-making events and gaining popularity in Mor Lam Klon performances. Although it is hardly performed nowadays in a Mor Lam Klon performance, its role was palpable during the time western instruments were adapted into the Mor Lam Klon performance to create the Lam Sing rhythm and make it more fun. Furthermore, Mark-Kub-Kab is found in Isan Pramothai performances, which, like Mor Lam Klon, adopted western instruments to enhance the entertainment for both the performers and the audiences.

Also, Mark-Kub-Kab features in Mor Lam Plern and Pong Lang performances. In the culture of Pong Lang performances, Mark-Kub-Kab is featured in 2 phases. The first phase is the Mark-Kub-Kab Lam Plern performance in the form of a Pong Lang performance (Roi Et College of Dramatic Arts) derived from the old concept of Mark-Kub-Kab in the Mor Lam Plern performance by Sao Noi Phet Ban Phaeng Group. The second phase is the latest development of Mark-Kub-Kab in a Pong Lang band featuring the performance of the instrument together with that of “Nang Hai”. This type of performance is the most popular Pong Lang performance of today’s time. Mark-Kub-Kab is rarely played with other instruments as part of a musical ensemble. Its main purpose now is to feature in a show.

2. The Roles of Mark-Kub-Kab in Performing Arts

It has been found that Mark-Kub-Kab has roles in Isan cultural performing arts as follows:

2.1. In local performances

This type of Mark-Kub-Kab performance is played in local festivals. In some places, a Mark-Kub-Kab band is formed and the instrument is played along with other Isan musical instruments in a band similar to Isan Klong Yao band with dancers and both male and female performers. Today, this type of performance is often seen in local festivals such as Boon Bang Fai festival in which the elderly play Mark-Kub-Kab in a parade and draw attention by making colorful movements.

Picture 2: “Mark-Kub-Kab”. In local performances (local). Ban Dong-Yang.



Ban Muang District. Sakonnakhon Province Thailand.

(Picture by Noppon Chaiyason, 2014).

2.2 In Mor Lam Klon performances

In Mor Lam Kub-Kab performances, Mark-Kub-Kab controls the rhythm of Mor Lam Klon using Klon Thang San, Klon Dern Dong and Klon Teuy rhythms. Mor Lam Klon also applies country songs and uses them in their repertoire, called “Applied Mor Lam Klon” (Mor Lam Klon Prayuk). The performers are dressed for comical effect and add “Kham Soi” from Mor Lam Klon to enhance the entertainment on stage.



Picture 3: Shows the “Mark-Kub-Kab” . In Mor Lam Klon. Ban Rong Kham.

Rong Kham district. Kalasin Province Thailand.

(Picture by Noppon Chaiyason, 2014).

2.3 In Nang Pramothai performances

Nang Pramothai is Isan's shadow play, a combination of Mor Lam and a shadow play. In it, Mark-Kub-Kab controls the musical rhythm. Mark-Kub-Kab is also played before Nang Pramothai is performed. Later, during the performance when music is played, Mark-Kub-Kab acts as a rhythm section behind the stage together with other instruments. However, Mark-Kub-Kab can also be played on stage in order to draw attention to the stage and to add charms to the uniqueness of the performance.



Picture 4: Shows the “ Mark-Kub-Kab ”.In Nang Pramothai (Thai Shadow Puppet).

Ban Nong - See - Mum. Somdet District. Roi - Et Province Thailand.

(Picture by Noppon Chaiyason, 2014).

2.4 In Mor Lam Plern performances

Mor Lam Plern was once the most popular form of Mor Lam performances thanks to its joyful rhythm and melodies similar to modern songs. Western musical instruments were introduced into the performances. Mark-Kub-Kab has been a rhythm instrument in a Mor Lam Plern band from the beginning. Since it encompasses stylish and beautiful movements and enables constant mobility, it is played to accompany performers or “dancers” bringing uniqueness into the show. At present, Mor Lam Plern performances no longer exist, with one exception of Sao Noi Phet Ban Phaeng Mor Lam Group in Mahasarakham province that has continued to perform Mark-Kub-Kab Lam Plern as the group's signature performance up to the present time.



Picture 5: Shows the “Mark-Kub-Kab”. In Mor Lam Plern. Sao Noi Phet Ban Phaeng. Kosum Phisai District. Mahasarakham Province Thailand.

(Picture by Noppon Chaiyason, 2015).

2.5 In Pong Lang performances

Mark-Kub-Kab has been part of the rhythm section of a Pong Lang band since the beginning. The development of Mark-Kub-Kab in Pong Lang bands can be divided into 3 phases: 1) As a rhythm instrument, 2) As part of the performance called Fon Mark-Kub-Kab Lam Plern, influenced by the concept of using Mark-Kub-Kab in Mor Lam Plern performances, and 3) As part of Mark-Kub-Kab Nang Hai performances, which constitutes the latest development of the role of Mark-Kub-Kab in a Pong Lang band, in which Mark-Kub-Kab is featured in tandem with “Nang Hai”. This latest development is the most popular performance of a Pong Lang band at present. The movements of Mark-Kub-Kab and Nang Hai are derived from the combination of the ancient Thai kickboxing and Ram Plern dance movements. Mark-Kub-Kab is knocked against the performer’s elbows, shoulders, feet and shins in imitation of Isan’s boxing movements.



Picture 6 : “Mark-Kub-Kab”. In Pong Lang bands. Kub-Kab Lam Plern Style Pong Lang bands. Kub Kab Nang Hai. (Picture by Noppon Chaiyason, 2014).

Conclusion

Mark-Kub-Kab has been a feature in Isan cultural performing arts originally as a rhythm instrument. The instrument has seen phases of continual development up until the present time. It was first put into a band in a village's merit-making tradition such as in a Bang Fai parade when different groups of people convened at an appointed location. The musicians from various groups or men enjoying drinks together brought along their instruments such as Phin, Khaen, drums and Mark-Kub-Kab. They took the opportunity to jam and exchange performance techniques, giving birth to spontaneous folk musical challenges and, consequently, musical bands. Mark-Kub-Kab has been part of the development all along as part of the rhythm section, and its performance has been continually enhanced as can be seen on stage in Isan societies nowadays.

As for its roles, Mark-Kub-Kab features in 5 types of Isan performances: 1) Local performances, 2) Mor Lam Klon performances, 3) Nang Pramothai performances, 4) Lam Plern performances, and 5) Pong Lang performances.

Mark-Kub-Kab has been part of the Isan cultural performing arts from the past up to the present time. It started as a folk performance generally seen in local festivals or traditional merit-making events before becoming more prominent on a Mor Lam Klon stage when western musical instruments were introduced into Mor Lam Klon performances to create the Lam Sing rhythm for a higher degree of excitement. Nowadays, however, it is hardly performed on a Mor Lam Klon stage. In addition, Mark-Kub-Kab is played in Nang Pramothai performances for the entertainment of both performers and audiences. In these performances, Mark-Kub-Kab is played to accompany the movements together with other musical instruments. It was once played behind the screen as part of the rhythm section before being moved to be played in front of the screen before the actual shadow play starts and during intermissions. In 1972, Mor Lam Plern was extremely popular in the Isan culture, and Mark-Kub-Kab which accompanied the music of Mor Lam Plern performances was brought onto the front of the stage where the Kub-Kab performers played the instruments

on the stage together with Mor Lam performers in joyful and comical movements and manners. Mark-Kub-Kab, therefore, has been played in Nang Pramothai and Mor Lam Plern performances and has recently been introduced into popular Pong Lang performances that feature a Mark-Kub-Kab performance in tandem with a Nang Hai performance.

Discussion of the Results

The study has revealed that Mark-Kub-Kab is an ancient performance whose history cannot be accurately and clearly pinpointed, as in other types of Isan performances such as Mor Lam, Khaen, Phin (Sung), Heun, etc. According to several elderly informants in various provinces, Mark-Kub-Kab is said to be performed in auspicious events such as weddings, Boon Kathin, Boon Phawet, Songkran festival, and especially Boon Bang Fai. Mark-Kub-Kab helps enhance the liveliness and fun of the celebrations. Unlike other types of performances such as Mor Lam, Mor Khaen, etc., it is not performed by professional musicians, but by participants in the celebrations who join in the performances casually for their own and others' entertainment without monetary remuneration. At present, Mark-Kub-Kab can be found in 5 types of Isan cultural performing arts: local merit-making festivals, Mor Lam Klon performances, Nang Pramothai performances, Mor Lam Plern performances and Pong Lang performances.

Although its history cannot be vouched for by concrete evidence, it could be assumed from word of mouth passed on from generation to generation that Mark-Kub-Kab has been played widely in Isan cultural performing arts possibly because it is convenient to carry around, cheap and easily made. The methods of playing depend on the performers' wits and techniques. This is in accordance with the cultural diffusion theory which states that social and cultural changes are caused by the diffusion of external cultural influences and that communications between societies bring about knowledge exchange. It also complies with the theory of aesthetics which indicates that man seeks for what he likes and what makes him happy.

Mark-Kub-Kab is played according to the players' feelings and

improvisation. At the beginning, it was played as a solo instrument to accompany singing; for example, as the rhythm section accompanying Maeng Tab Tao song. Later on, it was played in a group or in duets whose singers also played Mark-Kub-Kab. In the old days, musical technology was not well-known nor widespread, and, therefore, the performers' emotions were not as wild as they are nowadays. The Isan music of today is enhanced by audio equipment technology and influences of western music, rendering a variety of musical genres and melodies. As a result, the emotions of both performers and audiences heighten according to the rise of present-day music. The physical expressions, likewise, have become more pronounced. Together with the changes of time and musical technology, Mark-Kub-Kab performers have expressed themselves more and more in their joyful movements, wits and accompaniment of music. Mark-Kub-Kab performances can be described in phases as follows:

In Phase 1, Mark-Kub-Kab was an ancient performance. A performer played the instrument to accompany singing or other folk musical instruments. The performance followed one rhythmic pattern all through the song and one pattern of movement; for example, body movement according to the rhythm of the music.

In Phase 2, Mark-Kub-Kab was played mainly for fun. This is the period in which music technology such as speakers and electric musical instruments played a bigger role in the Isan area, hence taking the music market to another level of popularity. Many songs or Lam verses were created and became popular. Mor bands, such as Lam Klon, Lam Mu and Lam Plern, were popular groups. Mark-Kub-Kab, as a rhythm instrument, also played a role in this popular trend and was moved from backstage to be performed on stage for more impressive performances. A solo player played Mark-Kub-Kab while showing movements which expressed his/her cheerfulness. This could be seen in performances such as Mark-Kub-Kab Mor Lam Klon, Mark-Kub-Kab Nang Pramothai and Mark-Kub-Kab Lam Plern.

In Phase 3, educational institutes were involved in the collection of data related to Isan folk music, the creation of systematic works of performing

arts, and the widespread publicity of those works. Performances in this phase can be categorized into 3 periods: first, a solo performance with a Pong Lang folk band, second, a team performance, and finally, a solo performance.

In a solo performance with a Pong Lang folk band, Mark-Kub-Kab was played as a rhythm instrument together with other musical instruments backstage. Therefore, there was not much movement. This form of performance was an imitation of Phase 1 which featured a solo performance with no movement.

A team performance (with movements) was a performing art featuring Mark-Kub-Kab in a Mor Lam Plern band. The performance featured a Mark-Kub-Kab performer and a female Lam Plern dancer dressed in a short Isan sarong. Both performers expressed manners of courtship on stage. Educational institutes created the performance based on the form and concept of the performance in Phase 2 which featured a solo performer in a witty improvisation. The performance was called Fon Mark-Kub-Kab Lam Plern and presented as a team performance in which the movements of Mark-Kub-Kab were arranged into patterns and accompanied by Maeng Tab Tao music followed by Lam Plern music, with the latter expressing courtship.

A solo performance (Kub-Kab Nang Hai with movements) has become well-known and widely popular at present after Nang Hai was initiated into the show. Both Mark-Kub-Kab and Nang Hai are independent performances. In certain fun musical moments, Nang Hai comes out of the surrounding urns (Hai) and shows her dance movements. Mark-Kub-Kab, then, takes the chance to move along to play courtship with Nang Hai. Mark-Kub-Kab, consequently, is performed together with Nang Hai as an opening act. The performance features wild movements combining a Mark-Kub-Kab Lam Plern performance with ancient boxing dance steps. The performers are also dressed like ancient boxers with a head scarf, arm bands and decorating amulets.

In terms of musical characteristics, Mark-Kub-Kab controls the rhythm. The performer knocks on the instrument at the falling rhythm. There is no fixed movement. The performer is free to improvise relying on his own wits.

Nowadays, however, performers of Mark-Kub-Kab in Pong Lang bands, especially in their performances with Nang Hai, do not seem to know their roles and tend to overact, thus forgetting to knock on the instrument at the right moment. These performances are more for visual effects than for true music appreciation.

The forms of Mark-Kub-Kab performances as described above are in accordance with a theory of learning which states that learning is a process in which an individual tries to adjust his behavior in order to blend in with varying environments and situations until he achieves the goal he has set for himself. This is true for Mark-Kub-Kab whose development has been shown to be constant.

Recommendations for Further Studies

This study explored the history and roles of Mark-Kub-Kab in Isan culture. This type of rhythm instrument also exists in other cultures both in Thailand and abroad. Further studies are recommended to compare the forms, characteristics, playing techniques and physical structures of the instruments in order to gain invaluable music information.

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