

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT SOME MUSIC FEATURES AND SONG LYRICS OF THE KHMER LIVING IN THE SOUTH OF VIETNAM?

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Abstract

In this article, the author will present some research issues as follows: Musical expressions of love for the homeland, Love among men and women, family affection, and attachment to work. The Khmer inhabiting South Vietnam practice all these expressions.

In another short section, common characteristics with the music of other ethnic groups in Vietnam include similar instrumental music, scales used and rhythmic structures applied.

Thereby, the author reviews categorizations undertaken in the past demonstrating that Khmer music strictly belongs to one ethnic group in the country. Also, musical instruments have been categorized in similar ways, using the Hornbostel-Sachs descriptive tools: Chordophone, Arephones, Idiophones, Membraphones, which are using a variety of scales and modes. It is also said that the inheritance and promotion of the typical values of Khmer music into social life, was a very pragmatic fact, which needs more attention. The use of the term “Folk Music” is only reflecting on a certain approach supported by cultural policies toward minorities from the 1970s to 2010.

Keywords:

Khmer music, Khmer instruments, Khmer songs, Southern Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, between 1970 and 2010, the study of music has made certain achievements that need more attention in order to review current outcomes and applications. Research issues regarding some musical features of each ethnic group, including the music of the Khmer living in Southern Vietnam, called the Southern Khmer, still require further studies and clarification.

Some studies of the South Vietnamese Khmer music deriving from the 1970, 80s are found in the following sources:

Kien Giang folk songs by Lu Nhat Vu, Nguyen Van Hoa, Lê Giang (1985); *Hau Giang folk songs* by Le Giang, Lu Nhat Vu, Nguyen Van Hoa and Minh Luan (1986). *Kien Giang Folk Songs*.

The authors also categorized Khmer folk songs into different genres, mostly based on their lyrics: *bompêkôn* (lullaby), *oumtick* (boating), *xaccrova* (chants), *phlêngka* (wedding music), *lam* (singing), *môhôri*, *bot chriêng*, *kômara*, *kômarây* (songs for children).

The Hau Giang Folk Songs, is a book primarily containing songs and lyrics of ethnic groups living in this region, including the Khmer followed by the collection of 100 Khmer folk tunes, which Nguyen Van Hoa collected (2004).

There are also monographs referring to the Music of the Southern Khmer and some Musical Instruments found in Soc Trang, their residential area, by Dao Huy Quyen, Son Ngoc Hoang, and Ngo Khi (2005; 2007).

However, issues about the characteristics of various musics and especially that of the Khmer are only partially mentioned, not deeply studied, dissected of each specific value. They are, furthermore, not primary study objects of the above works, with few exceptions (Jähnichen, 2012).

There are, however, a number of research outcomes about the Khmer in Cambodia. These are Chapbinh Pro Chia Prây Khmer of Chap Pinh (1964); Chapin Pithi Apea Pipea Khmer of Chapin Yike, and Bassac theaters by Pich Tum Kravel (1965; 1997); Pich Tum Kravel's Khmer Mask Theater (2000a); Đ'tt'ây, Rô, and Lakhôn Khmer by Pich Tum Kravel (2000b), and the Khmer Orchestra descriptions by Hun Sarin (2004). When Bonh Tum was a UNESCO listed Khmer Intangible Cultural Heritage item, some writings were added of Chhung Phanh Sô Phone (2003). Some observations on Khmer performing arts were simply introducing the origin and history of performing arts. Thensome others were describing subjectively the role and meaning of the pieces used in orchestras called A Răk, Pin peat, Moro, Chhay Dam, Muon Khrum, and Skochhas of the Khmer in Cambodia.

According to Pham Tiet Khanh (2019), studies of Khmer music in Cambodia have increased awareness, providing a multi-faceted view of different genres. However, Khmer music in the South of Vietnam, as well as its specific issues, were not the subject and scope of such kind of research.

The purpose of studying music in general in the current period is to grasp the common and highlight the peculiarities of each local group, and to study the function of cultural phenomena, the interaction, and the regulation among them at the time of research. This helps identify music regions, musical spaces, as well as issues in the theory of cultural diffusion. In the meantime, these principles may have changed along with new insights into the organization of societies and the interactions between cultures.

Studying social functions, as well as the ethics of Khmer music is a very important issue not only to the Vietnamese surrounding. In the music of the Southern Khmer, local music is a cultural activity associated with a specific social environment, carrying certain social functions, and the aesthetic characteristics of specific creative subjects, mainly lyrical features through the local language of the Southern Khmer in that case. Since time immemorial, the purpose of music creation and its function was of significant nature. Long-term changes in society may have found their expressions in the development of the Southern Khmer community of Vietnam.

Regarding musical instruments described: The most common classification system used in Vietnam is the von Hornbostel-Sachs method. This method of classifying musical instruments is based on the use of consistent criteria, which can be applied to the classification of any instrument in any culture. Therefore, it was in earlier years strongly supported by the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM) and is regularly critically reviewed, renewed, and corrected (Jähnichen, 2019).

In this article, research methods of different research areas were used, among them musicology, folklore, history, general fieldwork, interviewing, collecting, synthesizing, and processing

materials and ascribing them to specific talents. Relevant data had to be compiled to contribute to the clarification of the research issues posed for the characteristics of Khmer folk music in the South of Vietnam.



FIGURE 1: Khmer Southern Orchestra (photos by courtesy of the Khmer *Ánh Bình Minh* Art Delegation).

TOPICS AND CONTENTS OF THE LYRICS IN SONGS

Topics and contents of Khmer songs are mostly, expressed in their lyrics. They contain many elements of life such as the love for the homeland, love between men and women, love of the family, and working habits.

Songs Praising the Homeland

For many centuries, Khmer life has been closely associated with agricultural activities, fields, rivers, and canals. There were such living conditions that have formed unique cultural values, typical for inhabitants of the area. Song lyrics refer to this as the culture of adapting to living conditions, the culture of coping with natural fluctuations, and the culture of the exploitation or the daily use of natural resources. Most song lyrics are to create and express attachment, especially adapted to the natural environment of the river landscapes.

One example is: *I miss the sounds of gibbon howling / On the top of Mount Chi Xô / I remember lamenting / Still on the banyan tree branch / I remember every tick / Moaning on the top of the tower / Prechet Peak.*

Song Lyrics Dedicated to the Love between Men and Women

This is as everywhere a topic of great interest and holds the largest reserve in the treasure of Khmer songs. A striking example is:

He sat and waited for me all the time, waiting forever / The coconut ship was tired of falling down / Pouring water on me was very cold / And, the cloud was also gratuitously angry.

Or:

His boat swam lightly in the lotus lagoon / Lotus scent spreads sweetly across the sky / Listen to the water rolling along the boat.

Song Lyrics about the Love of the Family

Some examples should help understand the specific ideas of this group of songs: *Go to sleep, good child! / Tomorrow mom wakes up early to work and to raise children / I love them and I comfort her, I hold her / Let her kids sleep, In the dawn I go to plow.*

Khmer lullabies show in great variety this unique way of expressions (Jähnichen, 1993), for example: *My grandmother's love is so much loving / Darling, please don't cry! Yes, grandma loves me, I'm happy with her*

Song Lyrics of Working Habits

The function of labor is reflected in the Khmer's short songs and are dedicated to some working sequences such as: rice-treating, string-pulling, lotus-picking. Each region has different texts, but the main function is to pound rice in a rhythmic way and with a memorable text coming. In the next text example, there is an experience reported, which says that when pounding rice workers have to keep the rice husks and bran for use, which should not be discarded.

She is very good at / Grinding rice, pounding rice, ready to be diligent / Listening to the old people's teachings / Take rice husks to make bricks for the yard to build a house.

Another interesting song called Bompêao (lullaby for a nephew) has the following lyrics:

My mother works hard in the fields / A lifetime of two hardships / A whole life is muddy and muddy. All day long, hand-and-feet-wet / Sucking rice, rain, thunderstorms.

SIMILARITIES WITH MUSIC FROM OTHER AREAS AND ETHNIC GROUPS ON THE TERRITORY OF VIETNAM

Musical Instruments

In comparison with music from other areas and ethnic groups on the territory of Vietnam, one finds that Khmer music has some characteristics common to others. This is shown mainly in a number of similar musical instruments of string instruments, wind instruments, idiophones, and membranophones. Besides knowing the Hornbostel-Sachs nomenclature, it is advisable to follow the local classification systems.

Brass string instruments

Among the instruments used in the Central Highlands, three musical instruments similar to the Khmer string instruments are identified, namely the b'rooc, k'râu and the chink'la. They are identical to the Khmer chhayđiê (khsêđiêu, say đieu), the k'râu of the H're; v'rooctru of the Sedang; the tinhninh of the Bahnar; the goong used among the Rongao, Gie-Trieng and Bahnar, and the goong de of the Giarai, Rongao, and Gie-Trieng.

Similar to the truô sô, the 2-string fiddle of the Khmer, is the cò of the Vietnamese, the còke of the Muong, the Sisolo of the Thai, the door of the Tay, and of course, the erhu of the Han living in South Vietnam.



FIGURE 2: Khmer people's *Truô sô* (photo by the author).

The wind instruments resembling those of the Khmer *khôy* are, the *tàlía* of the Co, Sedang, or H're, the *alal* of the Bahnar, the *kađeh* of the Raglai, the *đinh k'lía* of the E-de, the *ống ôi* of the Muong, the *píthiu* of the Thai, the *pi* flute of the H'mong, the *tieu* of the Vietnamese, and the *xiao* of the Han.



FIGURE 3: Khmer people's *Khôy* (photo by the author).

Similar to the kongmon of the Khmer people, is the ching goong of the H'rê, the goong of the Sedang, the chenh goong of the Gie-Trieng people, the Chenh of the Bahnar people, and the gongs (muong) of the Vietnamese people.

Scales and Modalities That Share Common Features with other Communities in the Region

In addition to similar musical instruments, the modal scale in the music of the Southern Khmer also shows some common features, mainly with Vietnamese music of that area. According to Lu Nhat Vu, the so-called two-tone, three-tone, four-tone, five-tone and six-tone scales of the Khmer are recorded with hundreds of rhythms containing specific common traits of South Vietnamese music. The scale numberings, however, are not to classify any quality or historical relationship.

I may suggest that scales and modes are the key elements in this music, because listening to them eases the way to recognize and explain differences. But music is more than the way, how scales or modes might be constructed although, in Vietnam, this is a leading issue in theory as well as in music practice, where 'translations' into solfege are often used and become a sign of a self-colonizing approach.

Here some known theories based on the number of pitches used with possible examples (Lu Nhat Vu et al, 1986a; Lu Nhat Vu et al, 1986b):

2-tone Scale

2-tone scales are found in children's songs, with simple, rustic tunes, but very joyful in its construction. These songs are often accompanied by dance movements in a child's play. 2-tone scales can be divided into three categories:

Type 1 is still found in the game song *Lbêngrotpuôn* [Hiding sword] of Kien Giang province, forming a 2-Dur interval (c2 - d2) as the following examples demonstrate:



FIGURE 4: Excerpt from *Lbêngrotpuôn* [Hiding the sword].¹

Type 2 is found in the *Khâmênh khuyal krobây*, [playing in the field], of Hau Giang province, which forms a minor third interval (a1 - c2) shown as follows:

¹ All transcriptions are extracted by the author.



FIGURE 5: Excerpt of *Khâmênh khuyal krobây* [playing in the field].

Type 3 in *Playing outside in the field* collected in Tra Vinh province, there is a major third interval (bes1 - d2):



FIGURE 6: Excerpt of *Playing outside in the field*.

3-tone Scale

A 3-tone scale is used in Khmer children's songs found in the song *Chăc tucđông* (Pour coconut water) and *Chap koonkhleng* (Catch a kite) in the Kien Giang province. The following examples present a series of three fixed tones (fis1 - b1 - cis2):



FIGURE 7: Excerpt of the song titled *Chăcturđông* [Pour coconut water].



FIGURE 8: Excerpt of the song titled *Chap koonkhleng* [Catch a kite].

4-tone Scale

The 4-tone scale in the Khmer tunes also has many types. The following belongs to the common types. In the song *Mê Trây* (Guest leaving) collected in Go Quao district, Kien Giang province, the tone order fl - aes1 - bes1 - c2 was formed.



FIGURE 9: Excerpt of the song titled *Mê Trây* [Guests leaving].

Or the song *Oum tuck* (paddle boats) collected in Loc Ninh district, Binh Phuoc province, has the same scale structure.



FIGURE 10: Excerpt of the song titled *Oum tuck* [Paddlers in boats].

5-tone Scale

There are many types of the 5-tone scales in Khmer tunes. The following is one of the typical ones. There are many Khmer songs with the scales corresponding to the *Bac*, *Nam* and *Oan* in

Vietnamese songs. In the song titled *A Le* (Guy hunting) a 5-tone scale is formed, g - a - c1 - d1 - e1, which corresponds to the Bac mood. Also, the *Choôch Chung* (throw a ball), has a similar scale structure.



FIGURE 11a and 11b: Excerpt of *A Lê* [Guy hunting]. Excerpt of *Choôch Chung* [throw a ball].

Similar to the Nam mode of Southern Vietnam, is the structure in the song *Oum Tuck Chook* [Rowing]: a1 - c2 - d2 - e2 - g2.



FIGURE 12: Excerpt of the song titled *Oum Tuck Chook* [Rowing].

Or the song *Đomrây Thngôn Phluc* [Big ivory elephant] also has a similar scale structure.



FIGURE 13: *Đomrây Thngôn Phluc* [Big ivory elephant].

The structure of type 3 of the 5-tone scale corresponds to the *Oan* (variation) in Vietnamese songs of the South (*Hò - xư - xang - xê - cồng non*). However, this scale type is less common in Khmer songs. In the song *Xarikeo* (Starling) collected in the My Xuyen district of the Hau Giang province, there is a 5-tone scale: b - d1 - e1 - fis1 - g1.



FIGURE 14: Excerpt of the song *Xarikeo* [Starling].

Also, the song named *Kom Boontôh Boong* [Don't blame me] possesses the same scale structure given as follows:



FIGURE 15: Excerpt of the song *Kom Boontôh Boong* [Don't blame me].

6-tone Scale

Among Khmer songs of the southern region, there are three types of 6-tone scale constructions. Among them the songs: *Bompê Kôn 1* [Lullaby 1], *Xrây Rot* [Ms. Rot], *Bompê Kôn 2* [Lullaby 2], *Xôridăng* [Sun], *Cha puuk* [Sparrow], *Chbăpprodau* [Teaching'] may be cited as specific examples. Type 1 in the 6-tone scale is formed by two groups of 3 tones connected by a minor second interval.

The song *Bompê Kôn 1*, collected in the Long Phu district of Hau Giang province, consists of the following scale: c - d - e _ f - g - a.



FIGURE 16: Excerpt of the song *Bompê Kôn 1* [lullaby 1].

The song *Xrây Rot* (Ms. Rot) reveals a similar scale structure:



FIGURE 17: Excerpt of the song titled *Xrây Rot* [Ms. Rot].

Type 2 in the 6-tone scale is composed of two groups of 3 sounds. It is recommended to consult the *Xôridang* (Sun), which was collected in the Ha Tien of Kien Giang province. It has the same scale structure as well presented in the following example:



FIGURE 18: Excerpt of the song *Xôridang* [Sun].

Type 3 in the 6-tone scale of the Khmer in the South is also composed of two groups of 3 sounds. See the example below:



FIGURE 19: Excerpt of the song titled *Chap puuk* [Sparrow].

Chbăpprođau (teachings) collected in the Hau Giang province, contains the same scale structure given as follows:



FIGURE 20: Excerpt of the song titled *Chbăpprođau* [Teachings].

In addition to the 2-tone-, 3-tone-, 4-tone-, 5-tone-, and 6-tone scales, there is a combination of scale forms that produce a range of tone colors. Likewise, according to Lu Nhat Vu, this phenomenon is common in South Vietnamese folk songs. This also proves that the

characteristic of the modal scale in Khmer Southern folk music shows some common features with Vietnamese music.



FIGURE 21: Artist Kiên Via Sa Na playing *roneat* (photo by courtesy of Khmer *Ánh Bình Minh*, Art Delegation).

CONCLUSION

Khmer music has the characteristics of music, absorbed the arts of other ethnic groups in the country and Southeast Asia. This is reflected in the material used in musical instruments, similar musical instruments belonging to significant instrument groups played in their areas and the represented tunings of musical instruments.

In addition, music of the Southern Khmer region also has the characteristics of music in the Southeast Asian region, using gongs through assigned persons. Although there are common musical features in the Central Highlands, music of the Southern Khmer region has its idiosyncrasies. Music of the Khmer as well as Khmer people are as talented as many other people in art, which is clearly shown in their musical efforts.

Through the study of scales and musical construction principles found in the music of the Khmer, it becomes visible that the way of thinking about music can be far different from that of other ethnic groups inhabiting the same region. Khmer music shows flexibility, skillfulness and quite strict rules in the way the music is performed, if some kind of music produced in a rather traditional setting is considered.

Consequently, one can see the theme and lyrical content of songs, characteristics as well as the role and dominating ethics of Khmer music for contemporary music within the larger national context of a, lived culture in Vietnam. This contribution is only a very small beginning of an exploration of some functional issues and musical methods of the Khmer living in South Vietnam that should be further studied.

The inheritance and promotion of the typical values of Khmer music into social life is a very practical job, which needs more attention.

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