

# TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND CONTEMPORARY TRENDS: MUSIC IN ASEAN COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*The traditional music and performing arts in the ASEAN have found new powerful conduits of transmission with the advent of the digital age. Although claims of cultural ownership over music and dance occasionally appear on social networks and media platforms, the ubiquity of the Internet has in fact benefitted the general public, allowing them access to images and sounds hitherto unknown. Modernisation has taken its toll on the region's musical heritage. Ancient elements of indigenous music have faded away. The influx of popular and Western music has increasingly eroded the space and demand for traditional music. Many orchestras in the region feature diverse musical instruments tuned to a common Western tuning system, thus relinquishing their Asian musical roots. The fusion of Asian musical ensembles with Western musical instruments has forced the tuning of gongs, xylophones, metallophones, and singing to the Western diatonic scale, losing their indigenous resonances, sonorities, and timbres. Urbanisation and the migration of the young into urban areas disrupted the discontinuity in generational transmission of music. Village rituals and ceremonies play an important role in preserving ancient religious systems where music, dance, and theatre were essential as part of agricultural life, trance and curing rites, and communal well-being. The onslaught of mass media and the Internet has also accentuated the de-sacralisation of ritual spaces, leaving many musical traditions behind as memories of the past.*

**Keywords:** traditional music, urbanisation, de-sacralisation, memories, ASEAN.

The history of music in Southeast Asia dates back to ancient times when the Austronesians, Austroasiatics, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Mon-Khmer, and Sino-Tibetans settled in the region, bringing with them not only their languages but also their songs, musical instruments, dances, rituals and ceremonies. Deeply entrenched in history and culture, these traditions have also undergone profound exchanges and changes, diversifications and transformations over time.

Many musical instruments in Southeast Asia are evocative of the natural landscape and spiritual life of its early settlers. The oldest and most common musical instruments are made of bamboo, a plant that is found across the region. With soft and gentle sounds, bamboo instruments are played in expressing human feelings and fostering artistic communications among villagers. The bronze gong

ensembles are revered among village communities for communicating with the spirit world. Village rituals since times past invoke this kinship between the human and spiritual realms.

Musical instruments also reflect the continuing process of cross-cultural and inter-regional exchanges that transcend both natural and political boundaries. Variants of bamboo and wooden instruments in the region such as panpipes, pipes-in-a row, zithers, scrapers, stamping tubes and sticks, quill-tubes, buzzers, xylophones, blades, mouth harps, percussion beams and planks, and rows of sticks can also be found in South China, parts of India, and Oceania. Today, these musical instruments continue their journey to other parts of the world, assimilating and adapting to their new surroundings. For example, the Javanese and Balinese gamelans are studied and played today in

Japan, China, Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Europe, and America. Thai music concerts are also widely enjoyed in these parts of the world.

Traditional music and performing arts have found new powerful media of transmission with the advent of the digital age. Although claims of cultural ownership over music and dance occasionally appear on social networks and media platforms, the ubiquity of the Internet has in fact benefitted the general public, with access to world-wide images and sounds. The rapid growth in online connectivity, with mobile phones, social media, and the Internet has enhanced interactions between musicians and audiences. Rituals and ceremonies in the temples of Bali, the courts of Java, or the mountains of Luzon, Sulawesi, Vietnam and Borneo, as well as processions and street parades involving thousands of dancers in Surakarta, Singaraja and Banjar (Indonesia), Kalinga (the Philippines) and Thailand can now be viewed live on webcasts. Recently, the Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta (Indonesian Institute of the Arts) celebrated its 14<sup>th</sup> World Dance Day on 28-29 April with 200 performing groups of 6000 dancers.

In the process of reaching out to new audiences and adapting with changes, however, some elements of indigenous music have faded away. Modernisation has taken its toll on the region's musical heritage through several factors such as the concept of modernity in music-making and Western cultural influences that started since the colonial period. The influx of popular and Western music has increasingly eroded the space and demand for traditional music. Modernity has also found its expressions in the form of *avant-garde* music, theatre, dance and film. Various forms of reconstitution and fusion today reveal the tensions between tradition and modernity that have always been a significant structural principle in the conception of the musical arts.

Additionally, urbanisation and the migration of young people into urban areas have contributed to the discontinuity in generational transmission of traditional music, and hollowed out the communal

environment where traditional music once thrived. Village rituals and ceremonies play an important role in preserving ancient religious systems where music, dance, and theatre were essential as part of agricultural life, trance and curing rites, and communal well-being. Religious rituals used to be the most dynamic means for the continuity of musical traditions in villages, temples, mosques, and churches. However, many of these musical traditions have disappeared as many people have converted from local beliefs, and their missionaries prohibit old practices. The way people practice their religious beliefs has also evolved, both in rural and especially in urban areas where different religious communities co-exist, and where communal living has given way to a more individualistic lifestyle. The onslaught of mass media and the Internet has also accentuated the de-sacralisation of ritual spaces, leaving many musical traditions behind as memories of the past.

As part of the globalisation drive in the cultural and musical scene, many artists have collaborated with other musicians from around the world to produce experimental musical forms. In most cases, there is no single composer and one music system becomes more dominant than the other. Many orchestras in the region use various musical instruments tuned to a common Western tuning system, thus relinquishing their Asian musical roots. The fusion of Asian musical ensembles with Western musical instruments has also forced the tuning of gongs, xylophones, metallophones, and singing to the Western diatonic scale, where these instruments lose indigenous resonances, sonorities, and timbres.

Tourism expansion for economic development has also threatened to erode the culture and space for the traditional performing arts. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bali was home to foreign scholars, artists, musicians, and dancers. Today, it has become the playground of big corporations building hotels, resorts and villas. Rice fields are converted to accommodate increasing tourist numbers, radically altering village landscapes. There exist today two Balis—one for the Balinese, and one for tourists and investors. In big centres like Kuta, Denpasar, Sanur,

and Ubud, foreign musicians are now staging alternative shows to the traditional touristic performances. Similar scenes are found in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

ASEAN has devoted its attention and efforts to preserve and revive traditional performing arts since early on. The ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) was set up in 1978 to foster cooperation, awareness, and growth in the spheres of culture, the arts and information in the region. The ASEAN Foundation runs its Arts and Culture Programme that covers the performing, visual and fine arts, theatre, dancing, music and singing, among others. In addition, the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA), an institution under the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO), has also dedicated its work to supporting the research, conservation and practice of the region's shared heritage in the performing arts. One of its recent projects is to tell the heroic tale of Panji (a 14<sup>th</sup> century Javanese legendary prince) through different local versions across Southeast Asia, similar to the spread of Indian epics in Southeast Asia, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, to highlight the region's shared heritage.

Apart from regional institutions, the academia engaged in teaching and researching the region's musical scene has played a constructive and critical role. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, schools of traditional music have been set up in Java, Bali, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, producing artists, musicians, educators, and workers in cultural industries. Today, music education at all levels continues to attract young artists to pursue a career in the arts, and their study is further enhanced by the availability of materials from online databases

and archives. Facility for cross-cultural references and exchanges is also available as music studies programmes in Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam are now linked in inter-university seminars, with diverse curricular offerings that reflect the rich musical traditions of each country.

As the musical scene of Southeast Asia evolves and transforms with time, greater attention and resources should be directed to keeping alive the region's music traditions in its myriad forms. Music loss is the loss of part of our history and our legacy. Without adequate preservation efforts, the region's musical heritage that is fading away will leave permanent lacuna in the fabric of values that define who we are and where we come from. The sources for new musical thoughts and ideas are embedded in these ancient traditions from which one may draw inspiration. Music in Southeast Asia has flourished as it is rooted in what music means for the people of the region -its philosophy, spirituality and symbols that evoke the sounds of peace and tolerance amidst a world of diversity and linkages.

#### **Endnote:**

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