

หมอลำ การแสดงพื้นบ้านอีสาน :
ขุมทรัพย์แห่งความรู้และความบันเทิง
Morlum Isan Folk Performance :
The Treasure of Knowledge and Entertainment

อิศเรศ ดลเพ็ญ

Itsarate Dolphen

สาขาวิชาภาษาไทย, คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์

Department of Thai Language, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น

Khon Kaen University

บทคัดย่อ

ประเทศไทยมีวัฒนธรรมที่โดดเด่นเป็นของตัวเองแตกต่างกันไปในแต่ละภูมิภาค ในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย หมอลำเป็นการแสดงพื้นบ้านที่ได้รับความนิยมอย่างแพร่หลาย มีท่วงทำนองการลำที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์คู่กับเสียงแคน กล่าวได้ว่า หมอลำ คือ สัญลักษณ์เชิงวัฒนธรรมอย่างหนึ่งของภาคอีสาน หน้าที่หลักเชิงสังคมของการแสดงหมอลำคือ ให้ความบันเทิงแก่ผู้ชม ช่วยผ่อนคลายความเมื่อยล้าให้คนอีสานหลังจากตรากตรำจากงานหนักมาทั้งวัน ในปัจจุบันการแสดงหมอลำได้ปรับเปลี่ยนไปจากอดีตในหลายๆ ด้าน รวมทั้งบทบาทของหมอลำที่มีต่อสังคมก็เปลี่ยนไปด้วย

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์บทบาทของหมอลำในฐานะผู้ให้ความรู้แก่ผู้ชม โดยต้องการศึกษาว่า ความรู้เหล่านั้นจำแนกเป็นความรู้ด้านใดบ้าง การศึกษาครั้งนี้ใช้ทฤษฎีโครงสร้างหน้าที่นิยม (the Structural Functional Theory) เป็นแนวคิดในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล ข้อมูลของการศึกษานี้เก็บรวบรวมได้จากการลงพื้นที่ภาคสนามชมการแสดงหมอลำที่มีชื่อเสียงของภาคอีสานทั้งสิ้น 8 คณะ ได้แก่ คณะรุ่งทิวาอำนวยการศิลป์ คณะรัตนศิลป์อินตาไทยราษฎร์ คณะระเบียบวาทะศิลป์ คณะศิลปินภูไท คณะประถมนันทิงศิลป์ คณะคำผูน่วมมิตร คณะน้อมเกล้าลูกอีสาน และคณะแก่นนครบันเทิงศิลป์

ผลการศึกษา พบว่า ความรู้ที่ได้จากการชมหมอลำสามารถจำแนกได้เป็น 5 ด้าน คือ 1) ความรู้ด้านประเพณีและวัฒนธรรม 2) ความรู้ด้านวิถีชีวิต 3) ความรู้ด้านสุขภาพ 4) ความรู้ด้านการเมืองและสังคม และ 5) ความรู้ด้านความเชื่อและศาสนา จากการศึกษาพบว่า หมอลำได้สอดแทรกความรู้แก่ผู้ชมควบคู่ไปกับความบันเทิงทั้งแบบทางตรงและทางอ้อม ถึงแม้ว่าผู้ชมตั้งใจมาชมการแสดงหมอลำเพื่อความบันเทิงเป็นหลัก แต่ผู้ชมก็ได้รับความรู้ที่หมอลำสอดแทรกระหว่างการแสดงโดยไม่รู้ตัว ความรู้ที่ได้จากการชมหมอลำนี้เป็นเหมือนกลไกทางสังคมที่ช่วยควบคุมพฤติกรรมของคนในสังคมให้อาศัยอยู่ร่วมกันได้อย่างสันติสุข นอกจากหมอลำจะให้ความบันเทิงแก่ผู้ชมแล้ว หมอล่ายังมีบทบาทเชิงสังคมในฐานะผู้มีส่วนร่วมในการสร้างสังคมให้ดีและช่วยลดความขัดแย้งที่เกิดขึ้นในสังคมได้ด้วย

คำสำคัญ: การแสดงพื้นบ้านอีสาน, บทบาท, ความรู้, ความบันเทิง, นักแสดงพื้นบ้าน

Abstract

Thailand has its own distinct cultures which share their identities diversely in each region. In Northeastern (Isan) Thailand, Morlum or Isan folk performance is a popular folk performance which is a traditional folk singing accompanied by musical rhythms and melodies produced by Mor Khaen. Morlum is regarded as one of cultural symbols of Northeastern region. The major social function of this folk performance is to entertain Isan people to be relaxed after working hard all day. Nowadays, Morlum performance is changed far to the past in many aspects including its roles in society.

This paper aims to analyze the roles of Morlum performers in terms of giving knowledge to its audiences. The types of knowledge performed by Morlum performers were explored. The Structural Functional Theory is proposed to study research data. The data used in this paper were collected from the eight famous Morlum bands in Northeastern Thailand namely Rungthiwa Amnuajsilapa, Rattanasilapa Intathaiyaraj, Rabiab Watasilapa, Silapinhuthai, Prathom Bantheongsilapa, Khamphunruammitra, Nomklaw Luk-Isan, and Kaennakorn Bantheongsilapa.

The finding reveals that there are five types of knowledge taught by Morlum performers to their audience. The types of knowledge are as follows: 1) tradition and cultures, 2) ways of life, 3) health behavior, 4) politics and society, and 5) beliefs and religion. It has been found that the Morlum performers always give the knowledge directly and indirectly to their audience together with humor. Although the audiences expect to join the performance for enjoyment, they indirectly get much knowledge from watching this folk performance. It has been also found that the knowledge taught by Morlum performers is used as social mechanisms to

control the behavior of people to live together peacefully in society. Besides giving the enjoyment, Morlum performers have the social roles in making good society and getting rid of the conflicts occurring in present society.

Keywords: Isan folk performance, Roles, Knowledge, Entertainment, Folk performers

1. Introduction

According to Cook (1998: 5), ‘music’ is a very small word to encompass something that takes as many forms as there are cultural or subcultural identities. Like many cultures in the world, Thailand is rich of cultural heritage. And each region of Thailand has its own distinct cultures. As for Thai music and performance, it has well known that the traditional Thai music is a product of the capital of Thailand which served as the national music. Northeastern Thailand generally known as Isan is Thailand’s largest region. This region also has its own distinct music. Isan music shares different cultural features in rhythm and melody. Isan music plays a crucial part in Isan folk performance. It has created the cultural symbol of the Northeastern Thailand. Morlum or Isan folk performance is a popular folk performance which is a traditional folk singing accompanied by musical rhythms and melodies produced by mor khaen. Morlum is regarded as one of cultural symbols of the Northeastern Thailand as it has revealed many Isan cultural heritages. Nowadays, Morlum performance is changed far to the past in many aspects including its role in society. It is interesting to study the role of this folk performance in terms of the treasure of knowledge and entertainment in the current age.

This paper aims to analyze the role of Morlum performers in terms of giving knowledge and entertainment to its audiences. The types of knowledge performed by Morlum performers will be also studied.

The outcomes of this paper are as follows: 1) the roles and functions of Morlum in the present day are realized 2) the types of knowledge performed by Morlum performers will be also explored.

2. Research Data and Data Collection

The data used in this paper were collected from the eight famous Morlum bands in Northeastern Thailand namely Rungthiwa Amnuajsilapa, Rattanasilapa Intathaiyaraj, Rabiab Watasilapa, Silapinphuthai, Prathom Bantheongsilapa, Khamphunruammitra, Nomklaw Luk-Isan and Kaennakorn Bantheongsilapa. These Morlum bands were performed at Beung Kaennakorn in Songkran festival. All Morlum bands started their show at 9.00 pm. and then ended the show at 1 am. But in other places, these Morlum bands will end the show about 6 am.

The performance of each Morlum bands will be recorded by a digital camera for data analyzing. Some parts of the performance were collected in a video recording. And some research data are collected from the website youtube.com.

3. Conceptual Framework

The Structural Functional Theory is proposed to study research data. This theory is used widely in the fields of Sociology and Anthropology in order to explain or predict social phenomenon in various aspects and all social levels.

The Structural Functional Theory is used to analyze social and cultural phenomenon. Emile Durkhenim, Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe – Brown are those who have developed this particular theory (Livesey, 2016).

The structural Functions of this theory can be specified into 3 levels as follows:

- 1) The individualistic functionalism This function focuses on the need of individual actors. This function is necessary to satisfy the basic needs of individual person.
- 2) The interpersonal functionalism This function focuses on the social relationship among people. This function is useful for removing all tensions which are apparent in the relationship in society.

- 3) The societal functionalism This function focuses on the structure of big society and social organization. This function emphasizes on social stability, orderliness and happiness. It creates and forms the social norms.

4. Morlum: the Cultural Symbol of the Northeastern Thailand

The word '*Morlum*' can be referred to two main meanings. The first meaning is referred to folk performance. The second meaning is referred to folk singing performer. For the meaning of the word itself, the first syllable '*mor*' means the person who specializes in any field of knowledge. It is referred as a specialist or an expert. And the latter one '*lum*' means the action of traditionally rhyme singing. According to Miller (2008: 176), the word '*lum*' or '*lam*' can be defined as 'storytelling'. Therefore, the whole meaning of '*Morlum*' means the person who specializes in the arts of folk singing and performing.

The origin of Morlum is unknown but it is known as the folk performance of the Lan Xang included three widely dispersed centers of power connected by the Maekhong River as follows: Champassak in the south, Vientiane in the center, and Luang Phrabang in the north. But it is well known that Morlum is typically rooted of traditional Lao Lan Xang. Isan region right now used to be part of Lan Xang. Isan and Laotian people share many significant cultures including Morlum. Morlum has been rooted in Isan region long time ago and also shown its regional identity distinctively different from Morlum in Luang Prabang and Champasak.

Morlum is a popular folk performance and well-known in Isan. This folk performance has changed a lot from the past. Originally, it is focused on story-telling which is accompanied by rhythmic and melodious music. The story being told by the morlum or the Isan folk performer is narrated by the verse of song composing of words, rhyming with different styles of singing from the beginning of performance to the end. Along with the songs, *kaen* or a certain kind of home-made

bamboo wind instrument is the main instrument used to produce different musical rhythms and melodies by the mor kaen. Morkaen is the musician who chooses a melody suitable to the story being told.

There are different kinds of Morlum which can be classified by different features such as the melody used, a number of performers and the function of performing as well. The Morlum Moo or Morlum troupe as being study in this paper is always invited to perform for well-to-do families and for community affairs. It can be said the Morlum never fails to attract people to come together for certain celebrations and festivals. The below figure shows the arts of folk singing and dancing of Rungthiwa Amnuajsilapa and Rattanasilapa Intathaiyaraj bands, ones of famous Morlum bands in Northeast Thailand.



Figure 1. Morlum performers show the arts of folk singing and dancing

Morlum Moo has another name as Morlum Ruengtorklorn- a folk storytelling singing with Isan folk rhythms and melodious music. According to Miller (2008: 178), Morlum Moo developed gradually from lumphuen and likay-the Central Thai folk performance. It can be said that Morlum Moo was influenced by likay especially using raised wooden stages with multiple backdrops, adding lighting and amplification and adopting the latest fashions in costume alongside those of likay. All Morlum bands right now has been developed and

changed from the past very much in order to have their own place in society. They adapt their performance to appreciate the audiences by just singing popular songs not focusing on traditional folk singing and dancing. They keep only some features of traditional singing and dancing to be recognized that people are watching Morlum. The figures below show Morlum stage with well-decorated backdrops.



Figure 2. The big stage with lighting and amplification are added to Morlum bands

Even Morlum in this day and age is different from the one in the past, it still retains the traditional roots to signal the symbol of Northeastern Thailand. *Khaen* is still be used as a major folk instrument in performing Morlum to show Isan identity. Once the sound of *khaen* is produced, the soul of Isan people is evoked.

5. Results

As Morlum has been changed and developed a lot from the past in many aspects, it has been found that Morlum still maintains two main original functions of giving knowledge and entertainment to the audience. The roles and functions of Morlum will be discussed under the Structural Functional Theory. The following findings will show how Morlum or Isan folk performance encourages the audiences to get knowledge and entertainment from watching the folk performance in particular.

5.1 Morlum: The Treasure of Knowledge

In the past, it was quite difficult for ordinary people especially for women to study in school. Only men can have an opportunity to study with monks in a temple. Morlum performers are some of those who can read and know a lot of Buddhist teachings. And some of the stories sung by Morlum are from Buddhist teachings. Therefore, besides enjoyment, to watching Morlum is to get knowledge from the one who is expert in Buddhist teachings, living and literature. It has been found that there are five types of knowledge performed by the eight famous Morlum bands as follows:

1) Tradition and Cultures

Even though the tradition and cultures in Thailand are basically influenced by Brahmanism and Buddhism, the tradition and cultures that each Morlum band try to incorporate into the performance obviously show Isan identities. Some traditions can be seen in everyday life but some are not. For example, the Rabiab Watasilapa inserts a procession of the groom's parents in Isan style while singing a popular song Paithornkhamsabarn 'retract your oath'. As for Isan cultures, they will be incorporated into the shows as in some popular songs as well. For example, Isan culture are shown in the luk thung (folk music) songs 'sawan muang lao' or 'The Heaven of Laos'. The audiences can learn Isan tradition and cultures directly from this performance.



Figure 3. The cultural shows of Isan folk performance

The above figures illustrate Isan costume on the left and the applied Central Thai costume on the right. Isan costume is a distinct culture showing Isan identities which are different from other regions in Thailand. The tradition styles of *sarong* worn by men and women have their own designs. The sarong is a large tube or length of fabric. It is often wrapped around the waist and worn by men and women throughout much of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Even though the sarong can be found and worn by men and women throughout South Asia and Southeast Asian, Isan sarong has very unique designs woven from cotton and silk. People can learn these cultures from watching Morlun performance.

2) Ways of Life

Isan people live with nature especially in the country side. Their ways of life still depend on nature such as working in the rice field. It has been found that the ways of life of Isan people will be incorporated into the performance of all Morlun bands. All Morlun bands always educate people in living, especially in a married life. Isan people will learn how to manage the ways of life. And people who are non-Isan people can learn indirectly what the ways of life of Isan people are.

3) Health Behavior

Morlum performers have a role in giving some information of taking care of health. They always give basic information directly to the audiences such as how to avoid having an opisthorchiasis. Some Isan people love to eat uncooked beef and they do not wash vegetables properly. These behaviors have caused some Isan people to have parasitism. Morlum performers take this opportunity to give advice to the audiences how to avoid having an opisthorchiasis. Even many information of taking care of health are basic knowledge, they are useful to remind people to concern in their own health.

4) Politics and Society

The Morlum audiences learn diversities of Thai politics and society indirectly from many Morlum bands. The politics topic will be incorporated into the performance sarcastically. Morlum performers have a talent in communicating serious topics of politics by using humorous strategy. They might represent social problems to the audiences with funniness. They will reflect the social problems through the storytelling. The storytelling performed by Morlum performers teach the audiences indirectly for having good quality of life. People sometimes learn someone's mistake from watching the storytelling. Because of these Morlum performers have a social role in making the society being a social stability.

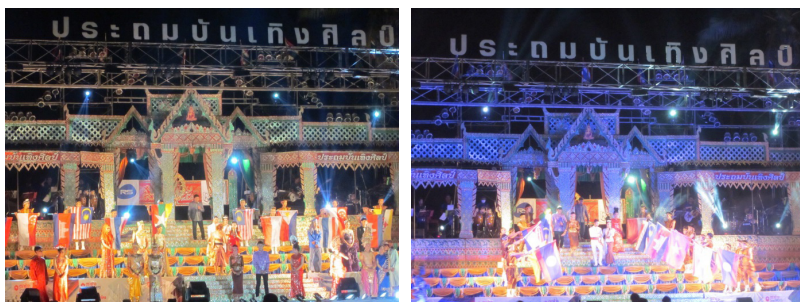


Figure 4. The ASEAN show performed by Prathom Bantheongsilapa

The above figure illustrates the ASEAN show performed by the famous Morlum band Prathom Bantheongsilapa. People can learn how many nations in ASEAN countries. And they also learn the national costume of each country from this performance.

5) Beliefs and Religion

As for the beliefs, it has been found that many Morlum lumruengtorklorn troupes incorporate traditional beliefs into all parts of performance; luk thung songs, comedy shows, and lumruengtorklorn. The beliefs that always found in all Morlum bands are the belief of karma- the principal of causality, the belief of reincarnation, the belief of spirituality and super natural powers, and so forth. These beliefs perceived from watching Morlum play a crucial role in creating the social relation among people. If people follow these beliefs and set them as social norms, people will live together peacefully and happily. As for the religion, the Morlum audiences get the knowledge of Buddhist teachings such as five commandments and levels of making merit. It is certainly that Morlum audiences learn the beliefs mentioned directly from watching Isan folk performance.

5.1 Morlum: The Treasure of Entertainment

The major function of Morlum is exactly to entertain audiences after working hard all days in their own jobs. People can enjoy the folk performance for a whole night. There are three main parts of entertainment. The first part is called the *luk thung* performance. This show is the opening part of performance focusing on singing the popular *luk thung* songs along with a troupe of gorgeous dances. The beautiful dress of dancer including light and sound make the audience enjoy this part very much. The second important part is a comedy show. Many audiences are looking forward to watching this show. All Morlum bands will have their own famous comedians such as Yaj Sam from Rattanasilapa Intathaiyaraj and

Or-bor-tor Phai from Prathom Bantheongsilapa. If the Morlum band has many famous comedians, people prefer watching it rather than the one has no famous comedians. The last show which is the main part of each Morlum troupe is lumruengtorklorn or ‘storytelling’ with Isan special rhythmic and melodious music.

It has been found that besides giving the enjoyment, Morlum performers have the social roles in making good society and getting rid of the conflicts occurring in present society. Morlum performers will suggest the audiences how to live in society happily both direct and indirect ways. The figure below a part of comedian show which each Morlum band have to put into its performance.



Figure 5. The clowning of Isan folk performance is entertaining Morlum audiences



Figure 6. The audiences enjoy dancing along with performers singing songs on the stage

The figure 6 shows how the Morlum audiences enjoy the performance. They always keep dancing and showing dancing steps along with the dancers on the stage.

Many audiences sometimes get drunk while watching the performance. That is why they enjoy singing and dancing along with the singers. Some groups of the drunk attend the performance until 6 A.M. and then return home to begin a long day of work.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, Morlum is not only the cultural symbol of Northeastern region in Thailand, this folk performance is the treasure of knowledge and entertainment for Isan people. Even some knowledge they get from the performance are just what they have known, those particular knowledge remind them to perform themselves properly as a member in society. We cannot say that people attend Morlum performance because of getting the knowledge. It is of course they come because of the entertainments. As for Morlum performers in this day, they do not really want to teach the audiences directly because they know that people attend their performance for enjoyment. That is why each Morlum band tries to do everything to make the audiences be happy. Sometimes they have to leave the traditional style of singing and performing and then replacing with something more modern like lukthung songs which are easy to listen. But Morlum nowadays is still popular among Isan people. This folk performance still confirms that Isan people love ‘enjoyment’ which is one of Isan identities.

Even Isan folk performance today will be rapidly replaced by Thai popular music or Western music in some parts of performance, it still retains its traditional roots in some ways and the use of khaen. For morlum performers, they should be proud of themselves as representatives of presenting Isan cultural heritage. They should maintain their own identity and incorporated it into their performance as much as they can. It is absolutely true that Isan people still enjoy watching Morlum

in its ways for enjoyment. Morlum will never extinct from Isan society because Isan people know how to adapt themselves properly, including the indigenous knowledge, to the new world of technology.

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