

# The Modernization of Isan Folk Performance (Morlum): A Change for Survival

Itsarate Dolphen

**Abstract**—Isan folk performance or Molum is about the folk singing performance narrated by the verse of song composing of words, rhyming with different styles of singing from the beginning of performance to the end. This folk performance has been deep-rooted for many decades in the Northeast. However, it cannot maintain its traditional styles of performance as it used to be in the past. As for the postmodern era, it is necessary for the owner of Morlum band to adapt his or her performance up-to-date and being attractive to the audience. The question is what modernity in this age is incorporated into this folk performance and which factor is considered as the main factor causing this modernity happen.

This paper aims to analyse the modernization of Isan folk performance in the Northeast Thailand. How Isan folk performance adapts itself to the postmodern era to maintain its cultural root. In this paper, the factors that force this folk performance into modernity will be described as well.

The data used in this paper were collected from the four famous Isan folk performance (Morlum troupe) in Northeastern Thailand namely Rattanasilapa Intathaiyaraj, Rabiab Watasilapa, Prathom Bantheongsilapa, Silapinphuthai. The observation and in-depth interviews of Morlum performers are the key qualitative methods employed in this study. And the modernization theory is proposed as a conceptual framework to analyse the social phenomenon and a new technology incorporated in this folk performance.

The findings reveal that All Morlum bands in particular have developed their traditional folk performance into a modern style by incorporating a social phenomenon and new technology into their performances. It has been found that all three main parts of the particular folk performance namely: a *luk thung* performance, a comedy show and *lumruengtorklorn* or 'storytelling' with special rhythmic and melodious music, are modernized in order to attract the audience and to maintain their folk culture. The modernization incorporated into Isan folk performance can be analysed into many aspects such as the rhythmic and melodious music, the Isan folk songs, the storytelling, the modern stage of performance, the light and sounds, the new high technology of the performance and so on and so forth. The most important factor that forces this folk performance changing to modernization is the financial factor.

**Keywords**— Modernization, Isan Folk Performance, Change, Survival

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## I. INTRODUCTION

ISAN folk performance or Molum is well-known as one symbol of Isan cultural heritage. It is a folk performance which shares many similarities with the folk performance of the Lan Xang included three widely dispersed centers of power connected by the Maekhong River as follows: Champasak in the south, Vientiane in the center, and Luang Phrabang in the north. It is about the folk singing performance narrated by the verse of song composing of words, rhyming with different styles of singing from the beginning of performance to the end. This folk performance has been deep-rooted for many decades in the Northeast. However, it cannot maintain its traditional styles of performance as it used to be in the past. As for the postmodern era, it is necessary for the owner of Morlum band to adapt his or her performance up-to-date and being attractive to the audience. The question is what modernity in this age is incorporated into this folk performance and which factor is considered as the main factor causing this modernity happened.

Therefore, this paper aims at analysing the modernization of Isan folk performance in the Northeast Thailand and how Isan folk performance adapts itself to the postmodern era to maintain its cultural root. In this paper, the factors that force this folk performance into modernity will be described as well.

## II. ISAN FOLK PERFORMANCE AND ITS MODERNITY

Morlum or Isan folk performance is well known as a symbol of Isan cultural heritage. It is a popular folk performance and well-known in Northeastern (Isan) Thailand. If we look at the word 'Morlum' for its meaning, the first morpheme '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 and Sean (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.

According to Dolphen (2014b), 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. In this study, *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. Dolphen

(2014b) mentioned that Morlum never fails to attract people to come together for certain celebrations and festivals. However, Morlum performance compared with the present time has changed a lot from the past. In the old days, Morlum troupe focused on story-telling which is accompanied by rhythmic and melodious music. The structure of Morlum troupe can be classified into three main parts as follows: a *luk thung* performance, a comedy show, and the so-called *lumruengtorklorn* or 'storytelling' with special rhythmic and melodious music.

According to Miller (2008: 178), Morlum Moo developed gradually from *lumphueng* 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*. The development of Morlum performance is one phenomenon indicating that Isan culture has been changed into a modern society.

The cultural practices of Morlum performance have been changed gradually. It is difficult to periodize history of cultural change. According to McGuigan (2006), to distinguish social and cultural change between different periods in the past is difficult. It is difficult to grasp the historical character of the present moment or conjuncture in time.

Based on modernization theory, Isan society has a progressive transition from 'traditional' to a 'modern' society. This phenomenon can be seen from Isan cultural heritage such as Morlum performance. The modernization of Isan society has been developed as it adopts more modern practices. In terms of modernization of traditional Morlum performance, many features are developed but some are retained its traditional roots in some ways. For examples, new modern musical instruments such as electric guitars, organs, trumpets, saxophones are used whereas the traditional musical instruments such as *Kaen* and *Phin* are retained for its traditional roots.

### III. DATA COLLECTION

The data used in this paper were collected from the four famous Isan folk performance (Morlum troupe) in Northeastern Thailand namely Rattanasilapa Intathaiyaraj, Rabiab Watasilapa, Prathom Bantheongsilapa, Silapinphuthai. These Morlum bands were performed at Beung Kaennakorn, Khon Kaen Thailand during the end of Buddhist lent festival. These Morlum bands started their show from 9.00 pm. and then ended the show around 1 am. The observation and in-depth interviews of Morlum performers are the key qualitative methods employed in this study. And the modernization theory is proposed as a conceptual framework to analyse the social phenomenon and a new technology incorporated in this folk performance.

### IV. RESULTS

Under this section, the modernization of Isan folk

performance will be illustrated first and then the factors that force this folk performance into modernity will be described later.

The findings of this study reveal that All Morlum bands in particular have developed their traditional folk performance into a modern style by incorporating a social phenomenon and new technology into their performances. It has been found that all three main parts of the particular folk performance namely: a *luk thung* performance, a comedy show and *lumruengtorklorn* or 'storytelling' with special rhythmic and melodious music, are modernized in order to attract the audience and to maintain their folk culture. The modernization incorporated into Isan folk performance can be analysed into many aspects such as the rhythmic and melodious music, the Isan folk songs, the storytelling, the modern stage of performance, the light and sounds, the new high technology of the performance and so on and so forth. The modernization incorporated into Isan folk performance can be discussed below.

#### A. The Modernization of Isan Folk Performance

##### 1) The modernization of rhythmic and melodious music

Comparable with the present time, it has been found that the traditional style of rhythmic and melodious music of Morlum has been changed a lot. It is geared to be appropriate with audiences' affection. The rhythmic and melodious music of Isan folk performance in the past shows Isan's identity of traditional music which shares the similarity of melodious music with Lao PDR. But the rhythmic and melodious music right now is composed in very modern style with modern musical instruments such as electric guitars, organs, trumpets, saxophones, drums and keyboard instruments associated with traditional Isan musical instruments as *Kaen* or Isan mouth organ made of bamboo creating a sound similar to that of the violin and *Phin* or three-stringed lute with a pear-shaped body plucked by pick of the right hand while playing. The following figure shows the traditional musical instruments well known as *Phin* and *Kaen*.



Fig. 1 The traditional musical instruments of Morlum: *Phin* and *Kaen*

##### 2) The modernization of Isan folk songs

Isan folk songs are ones that show a modernity of Isan folk performance. In the past, Isan folk songs are not a main part of this particular performance. In this day and age, Isan folk songs play an important role in the performance as one main part of it named a *luk thung* performance and also incorporated in the

*lumruengtorklorn*. The Isan folk songs are different from the old days as they are composed with new contents of modern society even based on the same theme of love. These folk songs are played with modern musical instruments associated with traditional Isan musical instruments as mentioned. As for the content of Isan folk songs right now, some of them reflect Isan labors working in industrial factories located in a big city like Bangkok. These Isan labors have to leave for modern city and work hard for a better quality of life.



Fig. 2 Isan folk songs performed with a troupe of modern dancers

Fig.2 is taken from Rabiab Watasilapa band to show the modern Isan folk songs. Isan folk songs are performed with a troupe of modern dancers. The dancers are both male and female. They will dress with colorful and beautiful costumes to attract the audience.

### 3) *The modernization of the storytelling*

The storytelling which is the main part of this folk performance is changed a lot from the past. In the previous day, Isan folk tales were selected to be performed in Morlum. For the current year, Isan folk tales are not selected as theme of performance but new stories which are associated with current society are invented and performed. For an example, a story of Isan ladies getting married with foreigners is one of modern stories performed in Morlum. This kind of stories reflects a modernization of Isan society. People are easily involved in the performance because they see lots of Isan ladies getting married with foreigners in their village. Sometimes, this phenomenon is illustrated in terms of a mockery to show that getting married with foreigners cannot help their quality of life to be better.



Fig. 3 Morlum performers with traditional costumes influenced by *Likay* performance

Fig. 3 is taken from Rattanasilapa Intathaiyaraj band. Even Morlum performers play a modern story not a folktale, they always dress in the traditional costumes influenced by *Likay's* extravagant costumes. *Likay* is a folk performance from the Central of Thailand. *Likay* is famous for its flamboyant costumes. Both men and women do heavy make-up and wear fake jewels.

### 4) *The modernization of the modern stage of performance*

In the old days, Morlum was performed on the ground which is totally different from the present day. Morlum performers right now play on a modern stage. This stage is 6 feet high with approximately 20 meters long and 8.5 meters wide. The stage of each Morlum band will be decorated with Isan and Thai traditional painting and arts. All sponsors of each Morlum band will be presented and decorated as part of the stage as shown in the following figure.



Fig. 4 The Morlum stage of Prathom Bantheongsilapa

Fig. 4 shows the Morlum state of Prathom Bantheongsilapa band which is built up with Isan painting and arts. The sponsors are presented as part of the stage on the left and right sides of the stage.

### 5) *The modernization of the light and sounds*

The light and sounds are very important factor to attract the audience to watch the performance. The more spectacular light and sounds, the more people love watching it. It has been found that All Morlum bands are competitive in light and sounds. They use high technology to produce an attractive show. The following figure shows how astonishingly creative light and sounds of Morlum performance.



Fig. 5 The light and sounds presented in Morlum performance

As we can see from Fig. 5 taken from Rabiab Watasilapa band, the high technology of light and sounds is proposed as a key factor to attract the audience. The spectacular lights make the show look wonderful and outstanding.

### *B. The factors that force Isan folk performance into modernity*

#### *1) Financial factor*

The most important factor that forces this folk performance changing to modernization is the financial factor. As more than one hundred people of performers and staff in each Morlum troupe to be taken care only by the owner of Morlum band, it is needful for each big troupe itself to be invited by the hosts many times a year within a season of performing. If Morlum is often invited to perform, it means that the last breath of Morlum performers is prolonged.

#### *2) Social change factor*

Social change is another factor that forces Isan folk performance into a modern performance. As Isan society is dynamic and changed itself to modern society, some old identities including Isan folk performance is shaped into a modern style in order to serve people's need. Many old traditions of Isan folk performance as mentioned previously are left behind for its life. If Morlum bands do not adapt themselves for new society, they may be vanished from Isan society.

## V. CONCLUSION

Isan folk performance or Morlum nowadays has developed itself into Isan modern folk performance. All changes are

geared to modernization for attracting the Morlum audiences, for maintaining Isan cultural heritage and for their own survival. And it can mention that the financial factor is the main stream of forcing its changes into modernization.

This study is benefit for those who are interesting in cultural studies and for those who want to vitalize the traditional folk performance which is being replaced by a modern style of performance and a new technology of globalization remaining in society. This study is also significant for being studied as the case study of how Morlum performers combine a traditional way of folk performance with a modern style of life to remain in harmoniously.

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