

## **Developing Teaching Methods of the Ja-khe by Utilizing the Indigenous Knowledge of Traditional Thai Ja-khe Music Teachers of the College of Fine Arts in Thailand**

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**Abstract:** Ja-khe is a Thai stringed instrument that has been popular since the Ayutthaya period. This research aims to study, the Ja-khe teachers original and present knowledge to study, teachings and impart of Ja-khe musical skills in colleges of fine arts in Thailand under ministry of culture and to gather the knowledge and develop improvements to the teaching Ja-khe musical arts of Ja-khe teachers in Thailand. Research results have found that traditional teachers emphasized the basic skills while, the present teachers emphasized only playing the songs in the curriculum. This makes the students lack of the basic musical knowledge and skills. Traditional imparting of Ja-khe music was a person-to-person teaching method, memory-based teaching method and a teacher-imitating teaching method. By contrast, the present teachers used a person-to-person or group teaching method, practical and theoretical method, technology, based their teaching methods on modern classical notes. The current teachings of the Ja-khe today make the songs lack musical aesthetic and pleasantness. Strategies to improve the teaching the Ja-khe are improvements to traditional Ja-khe musical arts, which emphasized the traditional ways and patterns of teaching method for playing the Ja-khe. It will benefit the students, the teachers, the curriculum and the management in Dramatic arts colleges in Thailand qualitatively, because of its high standard and long tested success based on the indigenous knowledge of tradition Ja-khe teachers.

**Key words:** Ja-khe, indigenous knowledge, tradition, teaching, music, fine arts, Thailand

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Music is what lull's the human heart to be gentle, calm and provides temporary sanctuary. It can also stimulate exuberance and courage (Montri, 1997). Music is like an international language that is understood by everyone no matter what their nationality or ethnic background's are. Music is usually more beneficial than it is harmful. Music is the ingredient that provides comfort to the spirit and is the cure for physical and mental sickness. Music is a friend during hard times, provides a companion when lonely is a tool in mediating love and creates friendship and unity (Phunphit, 1986). From past to present, humans have always had a relationship with music from birth till death.

Music has accompanied humans from as early as childbirth, birthdays, religious rituals and celebrations. Music also reflects the arts of a society through musical notes and songs. The livelihood of Thai people

revolve around making merit and numerous celebrations, all these activities are always accompanied by music. Music will for always be imbedded in Thai society. One of the oldest Thai string instrument is called the Ja-khe.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research is a qualitative research, which applies documentary research methods to collect data from surveys, questionnaires, interviews and observations provided the research with primary data while, other documents analyzed were from text books, research articles, dissertations, documentaries and research papers regarding direct and indirect knowledge of the Ja-khe musical arts, instruments and teaching music. Field analysis was performed at fine arts colleges throughout Central, Eastern and Northeast Thailand. During the period from October 2006-2008.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**History of the Ja-khe instrument:** Ja-khe is an ancient Thai musical instrument. The name of the Thai zither is derived from Jarakhe (crocodile) and likely relates to the Mon equivalent, *mi gyaung*, also meaning crocodile, which has realistic zoological features; the Thai Ja-khe has only the abstract animal form. Although, played on the floor like a zither, it is arguably a lute, since, the body and neck are differentiated. The Ja-khe measures 130-132 cm long, divided into a head portion (52 cm long, 28 cm wide, 9-12 cm deep) and a tail portion (81 cm long, 11.5 cm wide). The entire body is supported by 5 legs, 8 cm high, along the neck of the hardwood body are 11 high frets graduated from 2 cm in height near the center to 3.5 cm in height at the 3 lateral tuning pegs. There are 3 strings, tuned C-G-c, but most playing occurs on the upper two. The player fastens a 5-6 cm long ivory or bone plectrum to the right index finger by wrapping the plectrum's silk cord around the finger and bracing it with the thumb and middle finger (Terry *et al.*, 2008). Its highest 2 strings are made of silk yarn or nylon and lowest is made of brass. It has raised 11 frets made of bamboo. The player plucks the strings by using the plectrum that makes the beautiful sound. It can be solo or ensemble in the stringed ensembles and performed during festivals, rituals and celebrations. The string instrument is shaped in the form of an alligator and is believed to have been adopted from Khmer influence. Earliest evidence of the Ja-khe is during the Ayutthaya period in the 13th century, but it is widely believed that the instrument is an adaptation from Khmer musical instruments, because there existed many Ja-khe style instruments during and after the Khmer empire. Historical evidence that the Ja-khe existed in during the reign of King Praborom Trailokanat and that the instrument was classified as an instrument belonging the ancient Mon empire, which is related to ancient Khmer ethnic group. There are many ancient Ja-khe instruments on display in Myanmar museums alongside modern Ja-khe instrument. These ancient Ja-khe's were collected from Mon territories and cultures, when the Burmese empire took over and assimilated the ancient Mon tribes (Thanit, 1967).

The shape of the Ja-khe is believed to have evolved from the string instrument Pin (Indian lute) and performed by plucking the strings where the instrument is positioned horizontally with the stage floor. The Ja-khe was first played as a single instrument, but later was incorporated into the strings group and finally added into the Thai grand orchestra during the Rein of King Praputta Lert La Napalai during the Rattankosin dynasty. The Ja-khe

proved to be an instrument that was more melodious and was easier to play than the Krajub Pi (four string lute), which made it to be a favourite among string ensembles. The Ja-khe has 3 strings and would be played by using a pluck, which was made from wood, ivory, animal bones, water buffalo horns or natural wood carved into a round wooden peck similar to modern guitar plucks. Musicians would perform musical notes by sitting with legs tucked back to ones side and plucking the strings with a pluck, which is tied or bind to the right hand.

**Ja-khe rituals and beliefs:** The respect and belief in honoring Thai instruments is not a singular phenomena in Thai society. There are also wide beliefs in the respects of tools, books and construction techniques, which also carry the same tradition and beliefs. Thai musical instruments are made from natural materials that are considered sacred. Therefore, every musician must respect and honor their instruments. This belief and continued concept of respect has been widely adapted to all instruments. Every single instrument is held in regards that they all have residing teachers that are sacred and revered. Musicians cannot jump or walk across their instruments or perform activities that are disrespectful.

Thai classical instruments are full of miracles. The players must worship them before and after playing. What do they worship? What are in the instruments? It is certain that they are useful for entertainment, they are used for earning. They are really useful for believers. People who don't get usefulness from them will look them like the chips of wood and metal.

Most of the Ja-khe players believe that their musical instruments are the tools used for worshiping gods and the gods dwell in the instruments. Moreover, the Thais are taught to be grateful to their teachers, so Wai or respecting the Ja-khe is to show their gratitude. The gratitude to the teachers and the Ja-khe will make the players happy while, playing. It is the great power that supports the belief truly.

### **Ja-khe rituals and beliefs:**

- Don't walk across the Ja-khe because the god dwells there. It will bring you bad luck. Don't break the brass wire, it will bring you bad luck for 7 days. I thought that the teacher wants the student to play carefully. The teacher only threatens the student and it is difficult to buy the brass expensive wire. Nowadays this belief disappears, because it is easy to buy the brass wire and it is not expensive
- The schoolgirls should beware of walking near the Ja-khe. Their skirts shouldn't touch the Ja-khe

- The Ja-khe players must wai or respect the Ja-khe before and after playing. It will bring them good luck, self-confidence and good merit. It shows gratitude to their teachers. Teachers make merit by teaching and disciples by honoring and respecting their teachers; but at least one reason for holding a Wai Khruu ceremony is for merit to be transferred back to a great teacher, usually dead (Deborah, 2001)
- On Thursdays, you should sacrifice to the gods and your passed away teacher with the sweets, the fruits and water
- On the annual teacher's day you should place the Ja-khe on the altar and sacrifice it with a lot of foods. It shows gratefulness and brings you success

**Traditional and current Ja-khe teaching methods and techniques:** Traditional Thai music, like all Southeast Asian music has been transmitted orally (Stanley, 1984). Traditional methods of transferring knowledge from teachers to students is a method of memory and imitation. Currently, teachers use a combination of techniques from one on one teaching, innovative use of modern media such as tape, CD and VCD. The disadvantage of using media is that the reproduced sound lacks fidelity and fineness. Students are unable to see the delicate and refine techniques in producing the melodies compared to live performances. This is especially, evident during solo performances where, the music must come from the spirit and not from paper.

When students complete the process of Ja-khe basics from traditional methods, know the correct hand postures, completed at least 4 basic songs accompanied by cymbals, then they will be ready to learn more advanced harmony. Teachers will provide students with music tapes to listen so that they are familiar with the melody. Approximately, after 1 week, the music teachers are to provide individual demonstrations and have the students imitate them. Results are that the students will be able to memorize and learn the music faster and know the methods and techniques of producing the melodies accurately.

When students finish the song, they should be provided with time to review and practice the same song over and over again until they have the notes and techniques memorized so that they no longer need to depend on the music notes. When teachers notice that students have the song memorized, then they must have the students write out the notes in both Thai style notes and modern international music standards. This method is the best process to ensure that a learning process and new knowledge is gained and it will help the learner to review and have their own documents and musical notes to use as a reference.

**The development of imparting Ja-khe music:** Ja-khe teachers need to change their current teaching practices and seek knowledge and develop themselves by exchanging ideas and experiences with other Thai musical teachers and foreign artists. The exchange of knowledge will create a learning process with the growth of new ideas, approaches and combination of techniques. Some techniques and ideas may be nonproductive, but in most cases the combinations will benefit the teachers and learners with a vast variety of learning possibilities. Teachers need to use modern techniques to model and guide their students while, preserving effective traditional methods and values. Practices should be extended to using external locations and visits to hear and practice with professional musicians outside the institute. Students and teachers should also be provided with the opportunity to attend performances and musical arts where the Ja-khe originated from in Cambodia and Burma. Students and teachers should observe the melody, notes, verses and meanings and compare them with Thai songs.

#### **Teaching improvements and development**

**Personal development:** Learning the Ja-khe by using improved methods will provide the learner and those who are interested in the Ja-khe to recognize and appreciate music. Which is an art that is graceful, delicate and beautiful. Those who impart the teachings of Ja-khe music are the creators of beautiful music that is fun and full of joy. Learners of the Ja-khe will also receive happiness and the treasure of a beautiful cultural heritage of musical arts passed on to future generations. Learning the Ja-khe also provides physical fitness and exercise, creating the development of muscles, wrist and other physical movements with efficiency and keep the body in health. Playing the instrument will also provide good respiratory system and healthy mental fitness. Playing the Ja-khe will also give the learner agility to respond quickly and effectively to physical movement.

**Teacher development:** The improved teaching methods will help elevate the teachers concentration and enable them to separate their senses with efficiency. It will allow them to keep their conscious thoughts together and be calm during tense situations. It will enhance their memory to be more precise and efficient. It will also help teachers to be more observant and fair to their students and alert to current events and situations. Teachers need to develop themselves in theory, self-knowledge and music skills. They should select the media standards that

have been endorsed by experts and teachers should learn to understand and adapt to modern media. They should also produce their own musical media and promote the art of Ja-khe music by participating in training seminars and Persuade and support children the musical experience. Musical practices should be strict and performed on a regular basis of at least once a week. Teachers should create a network of academic music with other teachers, to learn to share the artistry of music such as teaching methods or new processes and techniques.

Utilize modern media types such as VCDs, DVDs and internet media to children so that the musical performance are easy to access. Organize songs and musical notes that are in trend with the learners.

**Curriculum development:** Courses must be updated to comply with the conditions of teaching and provide true learning. The classes must emphasize quality over quantity. The new basic Ja-khe songs of Plehng Song Chun (double layer songs), which replaced the traditional songs of Plehng Tub Tohn (Ja-khe basic) and Plehng Ching (cymbal song) is inadequate and wrong. Because the new basic songs creates confusion and misunderstanding of the poetic beauty of the notes. Using double layer songs is considered pleasing the learner to choose whatever they like. The disadvantage is that the learner will not be able to understand the verse and advance to more difficult songs and techniques. The traditional Ja-khe songs of Plehng Tub Ton and Plehng Ching should be reinstated. Curriculum's should focus on practice and performances and not rely solely on paper notes.

**Management development:** The improve methods in teaching the Ja-khe provides many benefits towards the development of management where, it emphasizes the importance of learning and the teachings of Ja-khe to others outside music institutions in Thailand. Managers must revolutionize their curriculums and assigned a dedicated committee to oversee the restructuring of the programs. Managers should encourage teachers to create musical media to use in their classes and that the performances are approved by professionals. Training seminars should be organized so that opportunities are provided to the exchange of ideas and music techniques. Teachers assignments should be made to ensure that teachers are assigned with tasks that give both teachers and students the highest potential. Managers should provide music teachers with the opportunity to see works of arts and music education in other countries and

cultures. International experiences are important and is a method to develop learning and skill development of their effectiveness.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of teaching classical Thai music has changed, especially in the teaching of the Ja-khe in the college of fine arts throughout Thailand. Traditional one on one teaching methods, traditional basic songs and techniques have been changed to conform with modernization and standardization. Policies to modernize Ja-khe classes have created a standard course that all educational institutions can follow and implement, but certain practices such as changing the basic Ja-khe songs and illuminating one on one sessions is misguided and will not provide students and teachers with the full benefits of the Ja-khe musical art.

In modern Thai society, some new beliefs are appearing while, old beliefs disappear. But the role of the Ja-khe is still in Thai society because a person-to-person teaching method is still being taught in the schools today by traditional Ja-khe teachers. Worshiping the teachers, the gods and belief that the Ja-khe god, who protects the instrument is the talented indigenous knowledge that transmits from the teachers to the students. So, the function of the Ja-khe is still the important role. Although, the Western musical instruments will influence Thai culture, but the Ja-khe will forever remain in Thai society.

## SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational institutions and music schools should apply the knowledge gained from this research and apply the improvements to the teachings of other musical instruments. Evaluations should be taken to determine the effectiveness of other innovative teaching models compared to the current methods to measure the student's success rate. Funds and scholarships should be provided to produce musical teachers and staffs at masters and Ph. D levels. Annual seminars on developing music and performing arts should be arranged every year so that continuous development, exchange of ideas and innovation are always provided.

Additional courses should be provided to review music knowledge, dance routine, rhythm and rhymes to increase efficiency and memory. Research studies should be performed to study the psychological effects that the Ja-khe has on the emotions of the students on how it affects their attitudes and perception of life.

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