

Trends in Conservation and Inheritance of Musical Culture of Ethnic Groups: A Case Study of the Akha Music in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand

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Abstract : Chiang Rai province is located at the northern border of Thailand. Most of the geography there is the northern continental highlands, and the population has many types of inhabitants, including Thai people, immigrants and ethnic groups such as Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Yao, etc. Most of these ethnic groups migrated from neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Laos, China, etc. and settled in the mountains. Each ethnic group has their unique traditions, culture, and ways of life, including the musical culture that the ancestors of each ethnic group brought with them. In the present, the Akha have the largest population in the region and still live together in numerous villages in many districts. Thus, Akha musical culture still appears in the community traditions and cultural events of Chiang Rai province regularly. This article presents the situations of Akha musical culture in the present and the predictions for the future. The study method involves the analysis of music information and the related social contexts, which were collected from the fieldwork of ethnomusicological methodology by in-depth interviews, observations, audio and visual recordings, and related documents. The results found that the important persons who are related with Akha musical culture include (1) a musical instrument maker (lives in Mae Chan district) who produces various Akha musical instruments, including gourd mouth organs, Akha drums, two-way flutes, three-hole flutes, Jew's harps (the sound of teenage love), buffalo horns (the sound symbol of hunting) and bird call instruments (the imitation of bird sounds), (2) a folk philosopher (lives in Mae Pha Luang district) who can teach music to the new generation of Akha people as well as lecture and demonstrate music to academics and tourists, and (3) a community leader (lives in Mae Chan district) who conserves Akha performances, singing and music through various activities of the students in an informal school. Because of the changes to the social contexts and ways of life of the Akha people, such as the educational system, religion, social media, etc., including the popularity of both Thai and international popular music among the new generation of Akha people, changes to and the fading away of Akha musical culture in the future may likely occur. Therefore, the conservation and inheritance of Akha music is an issue that should be resolved quickly. This primary study leads to the next step of the ethnomusicological work and plays a part in preventing or reducing the problems impacting Akha musical culture survival by the recording of Akha music in all of its dimensions, such as producing musical instruments, playing musical instruments, analysis of tuning systems, recording Akha music as musical notation using symbols, researching related social contexts, etc. and the transcription of this information to create lessons that can be returned to the Akha community.

Keywords : Akha music, Chiang Rai, ethnic music in Thailand, ethnomusicology

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