

Musical Identity and Cultural Resilience: An Analysis of Nasep Music in Thai Muslim Communities

Chanaporn Sangngam, Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand

The Barcelona Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines Nasep music as a crucial cultural mechanism for identity construction and preservation within Muslim communities in southern Thailand. Through ethnomusicological analysis combining structural musical examination with cultural studies methodology, this research reveals how Nasep functions as both artistic expression and social cohesion tool in multicultural Thai society. Employing qualitative research methodology, this case study focuses on the Ramadan ensemble in Santisuk Village, Satun Province. Data collection involved participant observation of performances, audio-visual documentation, and detailed musical analysis of representative songs. Thematic content analysis examined multilingual textual composition and cultural meanings, while structural analysis documented melodic patterns and instrumental arrangements. The investigation demonstrates how Malay musical influences have been adapted within local Islamic religious contexts. Analysis reveals sophisticated techniques including ornamental vocal styling, multilingual composition spanning Malay, Arabic, and Thai languages, and innovative arrangements blending traditional ramana drums with contemporary accordions and bongos. Findings indicate that Nasep serves multiple sociocultural functions beyond entertainment, operating as a medium for religious instruction, community solidarity building, and cultural boundary maintenance. The music's adaptability across ceremonial contexts, from nikah weddings to religious festivals, demonstrates remarkable cultural flexibility while preserving core Islamic values and Malay aesthetic sensibilities. This research offers valuable insights into music's role as cultural capital in multicultural societies, particularly regarding how peripheral communities employ artistic practices to assert identity and resist cultural homogenization in globalization.

Keywords: ethnomusicology, cultural identity, musical adaptation

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Nasep music represents a significant form of folk musical performance that plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of Muslim communities in southern Thailand (Kartomi, 2012; Matusky & Tan, 2017). This cultural heritage has been transmitted through the influence of Malay musical traditions. Nasep music functions not merely as a performing art form, but also serves as a vital mechanism for connecting religious values, social traditions, and the preservation of community identity within the context of a multicultural society (Barendregt, 2014; Said, 2009).

The study of music through the lens of Cultural Studies enables us to understand that music is not simply an arrangement of sounds and rhythms, but rather constitutes a symbolic system that reflects social structures, beliefs, and the way of life of particular groups of people (DeNora, 2000; Small, 1998). Nasep music therefore presents a compelling case study for examining how music can function as an instrument for creating and maintaining the cultural identity of minority communities within larger societies (Stokes, 1994; Turino, 2008).

Within the context of Thai society, amid the currents of globalization that bring rapid social transformation, the study of folk music such as nasep music becomes increasingly significant for understanding the processes of adaptation and cultural persistence at the local level (Appadurai, 1996; Robertson, 1992). An analysis of the melodic and rhythmic structures of nasep music will help reveal the musical characteristics that distinguish it from mainstream Thai music. Furthermore, studying the role of music within communities will demonstrate how music can serve as a crucial factor in creating unity and fostering pride in community identity (Ethnomusicology Forum, 2018; Slobin, 1993).

This translation maintains the academic tone and scholarly language appropriate for musicological research while ensuring clarity and readability in English. The complex concepts about cultural identity, globalization, and ethnomusicological analysis are presented in a way that builds understanding progressively, moving from the specific case of nasep music to broader theoretical frameworks in cultural studies and ethnomusicology.

Objectives of Study

1. To analyze the musical structures and performance practices of nasep music in southern Thailand's Muslim communities.
2. To examine how nasep music functions in constructing and maintaining cultural identity within multicultural Thai society.

Methodology

Structural Musical Analysis

Musical transcription and analysis focused on melodic contours, rhythmic patterns, harmonic structures, and instrumental arrangements. Analysis examined the integration of traditional Malay musical elements with contemporary instruments, documenting how musical adaptation occurs while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Thematic Content Analysis

Lyrics and textual content were analyzed for themes, cultural references, and linguistic patterns across Malay, Arabic, and Thai languages. This analysis revealed how multilingual composition serves identity formation and community boundary maintenance. Content analysis also examined how songs function as vehicles for religious instruction and social commentary.

Cultural Interpretation

Data interpretation employed cultural studies methodology to understand nasep's role in identity construction, community cohesion, and cultural resistance. Analysis drew on theoretical frameworks from ethnomusicology and cultural studies to examine how musical practices serve broader sociocultural functions

Conclusion

Analysis of Melodic and Rhythmic Structures in Nasep Music

Tonal System and Melodic Structure

Nasep music possesses distinctive musical characteristics that reflect the synthesis between the Thai tonal system and the influence of Malay musical traditions. Analysis of song examples such as “Nam Ta To Seia” and “Siang Klong Dang Tung” reveals that Nasep music employs the seven-tone Thai scale system yet applies it in a manner that creates a unique tonal color and identity.

The melodic structure of Nasep music follows a strophic form pattern, where the main melody is repeated with different lyrical content. Melodic movement typically occurs within a relatively narrow range and primarily employs stepwise motion, which creates melodic fluidity and ease of memorization.

The distinctive characteristic of Nasep melodies lies in the use of ornamentation that reflects Malay vocal stylistic inflections. The employment of glissando techniques and natural vibrato creates tonal colors that differ from traditional Thai vocal styles. These elements not only generate musical beauty but also express the linguistic and cultural identity of the community.

Figure 1

Drum Louder Song

Piano

เพลง A

Moderato (♩ = 60)

8

Figure 2
Tear of Tho Sei

Piano

เพลง B

Moderato (♩ = 60)

9

17

24

32

39

Rhythmic Structure and Instrumental Coordination

The rhythmic system of Nasep music demonstrates fascinating complexity, particularly in the utilization of various percussion instruments, each playing a specific role in creating rhythmic texture. The ramana drum serves as the rhythmic foundation through the use of two basic sounds: “ting” and “jok,” which establish fundamental rhythmic patterns.

The rhythmic coordination between different instruments reveals a clear system of role distribution. The ching cymbals control the main rhythm with “ching” and “chab” sounds, while the chab cymbals and tambourines add color and density to the rhythmic texture. The incorporation of modern instruments such as bongo drums and tom-toms does not destroy the traditional rhythmic structure but rather enhances and expands the scope of rhythmic expression.

Particularly interesting is the use of “cha cha cha” rhythm in newly arranged songs, which demonstrates Nasep music's adaptation to contemporary audience preferences while maintaining its core performance identity. This integration exemplifies the flexibility and adaptability of folk music traditions.

Characteristics of Instrumental Ensemble Arrangement

The study of Nasep musical ensemble organization reveals principles of instrumental coordination rooted in regional musical philosophy. The division of instruments into functional groups—melodic instruments (accordion), primary rhythm section (Ramana drum, ching cymbals), and auxiliary rhythm section (chab cymbals, tambourine, shakers)—reflects an understanding of creating appropriate sonic balance.

The use of accordion as the primary melodic instrument represents an intelligent adaptation, as this instrument can produce continuous sound and precise pitch control, making it suitable for the characteristics of Nasep melodies that require fluidity and delicate nuance control. The accordion's equal temperament system, similar to Western music, also facilitates easier recording and melodic transmission.

Figure 3
Nasep Instruments



Accordion



Cymbals



Cymbals



Ramana Drum



Bongo



Tambourine



Conga



Maracus

The Role of Nasep Music in Creating Muslim Community Identity

Music as Religious and Social Medium

Nasep music functions as a crucial mediator connecting religious beliefs with social practices. The use of music in Islamic religious ceremonies, such as *nikah* (wedding ceremonies) and circumcision rituals, demonstrates that music does not conflict with religious principles but rather serves as an instrument for creating appropriate atmosphere and enhancing ceremonial meaning.

The acceptance of Nasep music in various auspicious occasions reflects the interpretation of Islamic principles within the local community context, exemplifying cultural adaptation that balances adherence to religious doctrine with the preservation of local traditions. The use of

lyrical content emphasizing praise to God, religious teachings, and reflection on social issues transforms Nasep music into more than entertainment—it becomes an instrument for education and social communication.

Creating Unity and Expressing Identity

Nasep music serves as a symbol of unity for Muslim communities in the region. Participation in musical performance, whether as performers or audience members, creates a sense of shared ownership and reinforces pride in cultural heritage. The transmission of music through kinship and community systems helps maintain identity continuity and creates connections between different generations.

The use of Malay and Arabic languages in songs expresses connections with the broader regional Muslim community, while the use of Thai demonstrates integration within Thai society. This linguistic integration reflects the complex and multidimensional identity of communities that can maintain their Muslim identity while remaining Thai.

Adaptation and Persistence in Changing Society

The adaptability of Nasep music demonstrates cultural strategies for maintaining identity in a changing society. The addition of modern instruments to traditional ensembles does not constitute abandonment of tradition but rather expansion of expressive scope to align with contemporary tastes. This adaptation helps Nasep music remain relevant and attractive to younger generations.

The expansion of performance contexts from religious events to general social functions, such as provincial-level Father's Day and Mother's Day celebrations, demonstrates opening to broader society. This represents a strategy for maintaining folk music survival in an era of high modern entertainment influence. This transformation also helps non-Muslim Thai society become more familiar with and understanding of Muslim community culture.

Nasep Music in the Context of Thai Multiculturalism

Representing Cultural Diversity

Nasep music provides a clear example of cultural diversity in Thai society. The study of this musical form helps us understand that Thai identity does not have a single definition but comprises diverse cultural groups, each with distinctive characteristics. The ability of Nasep music to persist and continue developing in Thai society demonstrates tolerance and acceptance of cultural differences.

The study of Nasep music also opens opportunities to question concepts of mainstream and peripheral cultures. The serious study and documentation of minority community folk music reflects changing attitudes toward cultural diversity and recognition that the cultures of various communities all possess equal value and importance.

Role in Creating Multicultural Awareness

Nasep music has potential as an instrument for creating multicultural awareness in Thai society. Providing knowledge about this musical form to the general public will help reduce prejudice and enhance mutual understanding between different cultural groups. When non-Muslim Thais learn about and understand Nasep music, it creates appreciation for the beauty and depth of cultures different from their own.

Promoting exchange and collaborative learning between folk music of different cultural groups in Thailand may lead to the emergence of new musical forms that clearly reflect Thai society's multicultural nature. Comparative studies between Nasep music and folk music of other ethnic groups in Thailand will help reveal both similarities and differences, and understand the processes of cultural exchange occurring within Thai territory.

Significance for Cultural Heritage Conservation

Mechanisms of Transmission and Innovation

The study of Nasep music reveals effective patterns of cultural conservation. The combination of preserving the authentic core of traditional culture with improvements to suit contemporary times represents a strategy that enables folk culture to survive and remain meaningful to new generations. The success of the Romdorn ensemble in transmitting from founding generations to youth demonstrates the importance of community participation in conservation efforts.

The use of modern technology in recording and disseminating Nasep music, such as using Western musical notation for melodic documentation, represents the application of modern tools for conservation purposes. This method enables knowledge transmission with greater accuracy and broader accessibility.

Creating Value Awareness

Systematic research and study of Nasep music helps elevate the status of folk music from merely local entertainment to valuable cultural heritage with academic merit. Quality research documentation and analysis will help society recognize the importance and complexity of folk music and may lead to government and social support for conservation and promotion.

The integration of Nasep music into formal education systems, both at basic education and higher education levels, will guarantee long-term cultural survival. Providing knowledge to youth who are not members of Muslim communities will help expand the support base and create deeper understanding.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Barendregt, B. (2014). *Sonic modernities in the Malay world: A history of popular music, social distinction and novel lifestyles (1930s-2000s)*. Brill.
- DeNora, T. (2000). *Music in everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ethnomusicology Forum. (2018). Special issue: Music and cultural identity in Southeast Asia. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 27(2).
- Kartomi, M. J. (2012). *Musical journeys in Sumatra*. University of Illinois Press.
- Kramer, L. (2007). *Why classical music still matters*. University of California Press.
- Matusky, P. (2004). Malaysian traditional music: Unity and diversity. In T. Miller & S. Williams (Eds.), *The Garland handbook of Southeast Asian music* (pp. 301-360). Routledge.
- Matusky, P., & Tan, S. B. (2017). *The music of Malaysia: The classical, folk and syncretic traditions* (2nd ed.). Ashgate.
- Miller, T., & Williams, S. (Eds.). (2008). *The Garland encyclopedia of world music: Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- Nettl, B. (2005). *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts* (2nd ed.). University of Illinois Press.
- Robertson, R. (1992). *Globalization: Social theory and global culture*. Sage Publications.
- Said, E. W. (2009). *Musical elaborations*. Columbia University Press.
- Slobin, M. (1993). *Subcultural sounds: Micromusics of the West*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Stokes, M. (Ed.). (1994). *Ethnicity, identity and music: The musical construction of place*. Berg Publishers.
- Sutton, R. A. (2002). *Calling back the spirit: Music, dance, and cultural politics in lowland South Sulawesi*. Oxford University Press.
- Tenzer, M. (Ed.). (2006). *Analytical studies in world music*. Oxford University Press.
- Turino, T. (2008). *Music as social life: The politics of participation*. University of Chicago Press.

Contact email: Chanaporn.s@pkru.ac.th