

Music Icons, Allegories and Symbolic Representation: Iconological Analysis of Thai Murals Along the Mae Klong Riverside

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Received 31 May 2021 | Accepted 24 October 2022 |

Published online 27 February 2024

Abstract

This article examines the Thai music iconology – with a focus on the instruments and ensembles and their symbolic representations – of monastery murals along the Mae Klong riverside. It also investigates how Thai music iconology links to broader views on Thai music, including those from Buddhism, culture, and social realms.

Thirty-eight murals from the Ayutthaya period to the King Rama V period were selected for analysis. Improvised tools from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) inter-semiotic, multidimensional approach and Panofsky's (1962) concepts of iconography were employed in the data analysis. Additionally, an in-depth interview was conducted with key informants, including local intellectuals and experts in the related areas, for data triangulation. The findings show significant influence of music on Thai social forms, religious beliefs, as well as cultural and historical values.

Keywords

music icons – allegories – symbolic representation – Thai murals – Mae Klong riverside

1 Introduction

Music as part of culture is a human-made phenomenon involving sound, behavioral representations and emotional factors (Duriyanga 1976; Walsem 2005). By stimulating, music is believed to have a variety of effects and functions that act as contributing factors to the power of ritual. Four types of musical instruments – plucked, bowed, struck and blown instruments – through performance in Thai Buddhist ceremonies have become musical icons, embedded in Thai visual arts or in murals at various temples as depictions of community civilizations (Sudprasert 2013). These murals, painted in previous centuries, mainly contained Thai traditional ensembles that included *piphat*, *khrueng sai* and *mahori*. Each serves a special purpose according to social and cultural practices. Musical artifacts have thus become essential sources in tracing civilizations ranging from nation-states to single communities. Bakker (1997), Pearce (2005) and Van Walsem (2005) noted that socio-cultural conditions in the past can be understood using tools known as “multiple artifacts” to explicate their antiquity. These artifacts help people understand the symbols and meanings used in the work of art and modified to current human practices and roles (Kress & Leeuwen 2010; de Miguel et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2019;). Additionally, Stephen (2016) concludes that pictorial records, or murals, are invaluable data conducive to in-depth historical analysis.

Practices of musical iconology focus on visual arts, symbols and interpretation in a particular work skill (Morton & Duriyanga 1976). These include materials in portraits of performers and composers, as well as illustrations of instruments and occasions of music-making. The materials in musical iconology are observable in many preservative and conservative

societies, including Thailand, where colorful murals are ubiquitous in many old buildings, especially ancient temples (see the compilation of O'Connor 1993). Thailand's music iconology is typically found along the banks of major rivers where environmental fecundity led to the establishment of human civilizations (Meskell 2016; Suvanajata 2001; Winternitz 1972). For example, the Mae Klong River Basin, where the several main rivers of Western and Central Thailand meet, is a focal area in the formation of ancient cities of immigrants. Mural paintings as key historical evidence of Siamese civilizations are widely seen on monastery interiors alongside those of Muslims. Ratanawaraporn (2001), Hacker (2018) and Suksawasdi (2019) argue that it is important to understand the musical significance of what is visually represented in terms of the instruments and ensembles and their symbolic representations, including how this connects to broader currents of Thai music iconology, cultures and social representation.

This paper examines the music iconology found in monastery murals along the Mae Klong riverside to observe the interconnectedness of the music arts and the socio-cultural settings within the areas of study. The following section discusses the discursive construction of Thai music iconography, Thai classical instruments and the sociocultural factors surrounding them. It will also cover essential background information pertaining to music iconology, such as the representation of instruments and ensembles in Thai musical iconology and its integration with the narratives of those murals.

2 Literature Review

Work on musical iconology involves the interpretation of drawings of musical instruments, performers, singers, groups of musicians, environment and musical contexts (Falvy 1977). It is useful in analyzing and interpreting acquired information related to a musical icon and its context (Buckey 1998). This information may include a symbolic and metaphorical allusion to a particular visual piece. Following this, music iconology requires an in-depth understanding of the culture, history and other authentic information to claim its relevance to the music being interpreted (De Rosen 2014; Fine Arts Department 1999). Senosot (2012) revealed that music iconography is multi-dimensional and needs critical examination to fully understand its subtle meanings. For example, mural paintings are commonly found in Thai Buddhist monastery interiors and at noble precincts (Promin 2019; Raksamani 2019). Many of the paintings depict the traditional Thai myths of the Buddha's ten previous lives (Tatana 2006). Thus, the conforming concept of those

infrastructures is deeply rooted in Buddhist principles and Dharma precepts (Raksamani 2019).

It is believed that Buddhism was introduced to Siam by the Mon-Khmer, who then had their capital, Dvārāvati, in the city now known as Nakhon Pathom (Penth 2004). Given the geographical location, however, the civilizations depicted in Thai musical iconology were influenced by neighboring countries and by connection with India through religious belief. Falvy (1977) argues that this geographical context perhaps influenced Thailand's social, political, economic and architectural movements, with which the use of musical instruments is intertwined. Morton and Duriyanga (1976) and Meskell (2016) highlight that musical instruments are not only iconic representations but also indicators of the development of a civilization.

Mural paintings found in old temples are centered around Thai Buddhist principles and the previous lives of the Lord Buddha in different forms, both human and animal (Kewarin 2011). Musical icons were included among these allegories. The integration of Thai Buddhist principles may be explicitly or implicitly depicted in many Thai murals (Prapatpong 2004).

Vital Buddhist practitioners used mural paintings as a form of religious teaching (Raksamani 2019); thereby, their instructions can be seen in different visual art or classic paintings. The representations in the paintings were equipped with imagery depicting epistemological information in multiple dimensions at a particular point in time. Noticeably, the paintings were located on the walls of buildings within temple compounds, such as the ordination hall (*ubosot*) and the shrine hall (*wihan*), over which the main Buddha image presides. Additional paintings can be seen in the pavilion (*sala kan parian*) where people gathered to hear sermons (Chatbongkoch 2003). These murals usually embody portraits of deities, but there are also peripheral scenes of contemporary village life of local people and religious literature. Unlike other Asian countries where Western arts merge with local examples, Thai mural arts across the country reveal no foreign influence (Ruengrungrat et al. 2018).

As mentioned above, the area of study is based on the Mae Klong riverside. Nowadays, this river is one of the prominent rivers in central Thailand flowing from Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, and Samut Songkram to the Gulf of Thailand. From being a former national trading hub interconnected with other rivers and their tributaries, the Mae Klong River Basin now has also become a place of residence and sustained farming. Thus, the musical paintings in temples around the Mae Klong River are interesting in that they involve contextual inclusions of the housing, clothing and living conditions of people of different cultures and races which have shaped the musical icons. Buckley (1998) believes it imperative that the study of musical iconography analysis be

multi-dimensional, i.e., consider the connotational and denotational meanings of two or more visual domains.

3 Methodology

This article utilizes iconology from the perspective of renaissance art (Panofsky 1962) to unravel the music iconology – such as the musical instruments and ensembles and their symbolic representations – of works appearing on monastery murals along the Mae Klong River Basin. It explores the inter-relationship between music iconology and Thai historical and socio-cultural roles in the form of the narratives of these murals. Since Panofsky's concept of iconological analysis focuses on the “what” rather than “how,” we have combined it with the idea of multidimensionality of visual arts put forth by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020). As such, we can understand both the “what *and* how” of the music and the murals. This corroborates Muller's (2011) argument that one must be systematic in work on iconography and iconology as a visual method and approach, ensuring that the meaning of the object is included. From this perspective, there is also the crucial iconographical sense of the picture, which may come from a salient theme or content. For example, research on certain works of visual art must consider Buddhist concepts as a departure point for understanding. These include holy words, pictures and materials (Müller 2011).

Panofsky (1962) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) argue that music icons focus on the primary or the natural subject matter, which contains vital musical instrument(s) and a person or group of musicians as objects doing activities in the event seen in the images. For example, the *phin* was painted after the image of the God Indra. Additionally, the allegories of the icon pertain to a narrative in which a character, place or event is used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences. For example, the allegory of the *phin* represents the three stars of Buddhist doctrine, a widely incorporated subject matter. Crucially, the symbolic representation of the selected musical icon, for instance, the *phin*, demonstrates liberation or enlightenment (the middle way in living life).

These combinations of elements from this perspective strengthen in light of the discourse. It can be defined in the poststructuralist sense as a “multi-iconographical analysis” (Muller 2020, 312), which displays all crucial aspects in exploring traditional musical icons, in particular, mural art. The aims of this article are to examine the purposes of musical iconology on monastery murals,

and to understand the broader view with regard to Buddhist teachings as well as the historical and sociocultural meanings behind the studied paintings.

In the view of Miller and Chonpairot (1994), the incomplete content of Thai murals with elements of musical instruments, allegories and symbolic representations in Buddhism, monastery compounds in Western Thailand and the major historical trading hubs can be multidimensionally analyzed. The preliminary phase of the study undertook a selection process of Buddhist temples to be included in the research. There were 31 Buddhist temples, encompassing Kanchanaburi province, Ratchaburi province and Samut Songkram province, through which the Mae Klong River flows (see Figure 1). Among these temples, 15 were from the Rattanakosin period (1782–1932) and the local Buddhist authorities featuring musical icons in paintings required in-depth analysis. The chosen temples were geographically categorized:

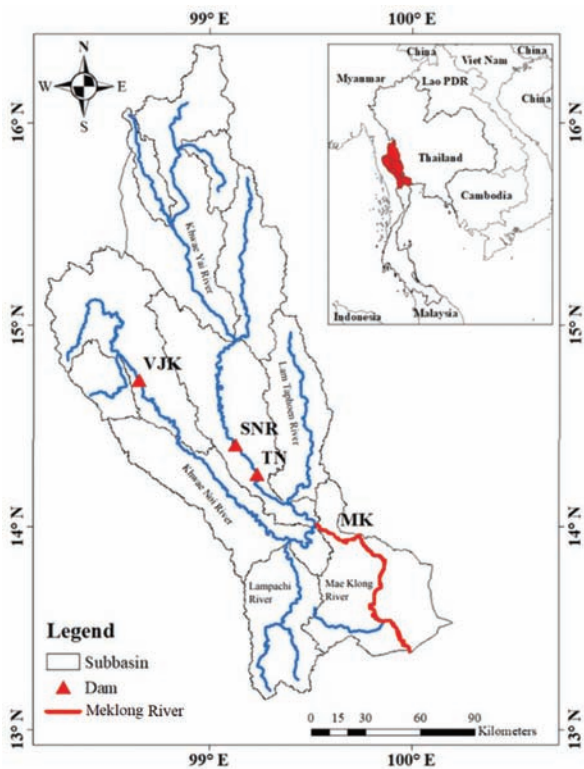


FIGURE 1 Mae Klong River map
ADAPTED FROM KHALIL 2020

TABLE 1 Summary of murals in the analysis

Group	Music Icons	Number of Occurrences
1	The God Indra playing <i>phin</i>	17
2	<i>Piphat</i> ensemble	10
3	Brahmin priests blowing a conch shell	6
4	<i>Mahori</i> ensemble	4
	Total	37

Kanchanaburi province includes Thewa Sangkharam Temple, Ratchaburi province includes Khong Kharam Temple, Sai Aree Rak Temple, Don Krabuang Temple, Muang Temple, Chong Lom Temple, Thung Ya Kom Bang Temple, Na Nong Temple, Yai Ang Thong Temple, Ban Khong Temple, Surachayaram (aka Lum Din Temple), and Samut Songkram province includes Bang Kung Temple, Kasem Sarnaram Temple, Dao Dong Temple, Pradu Temple. The rest of the selected temples are located two kilometers from the riverbank.

As Miller (2020) highlights, in choosing a visual to analyze, one should consider its “scale and temporal [aspect]” to see its possible meanings and elements (p. 284). However, during the preliminary analysis, we found that there were multiple occurrences of similar music icons. These familiar emerging icons were categorized as listed in Table 1 above.

There are only a few studies of musical iconography in Thailand and no detailed examination of the nature of music iconography and the musical instruments, allegories and symbolic representation of music icons in these murals in particular (Bunchopporn 2004; Chatbongkoch 2004; Falvy 1977). The following table illustrates the systematic analysis of the current study.

4 The Analysis of Mural Icons

The analysis of mural icons is presented in three dimensions in compound with the multidimensionality of murals. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) argue that combining additional identification can enhance the connections between designated components to better understand the query. Meyer (1956) highlights that style and how these iconized items were played are essential to understanding their existence and performances, where performing Thai traditional music wass not commonplace, except in religious ceremonies.

TABLE 2 Tri-stratal conceptualization of multi-iconography analysis of Thai murals

Identification	Explanation
Music icons	The key musical instruments and humans as objects, activities, as well as the events that can be seen in the images
Allegories	The stories and parables of the images
Symbolic representations	The symbols and interpretative meanings behind the images

However, following the analysis of the data, some elements begged additional enquiry into their social and cultural dimensions, arts and ethnical representations of the icon surroundings. The elements were then included in analysis.

Data collection included interviews with local intellectuals, namely, abbots and senior residents who have inherited knowledge of the murals from past generations, as well as experts in Thai traditional music, Thai history and fine arts. Questions regarded their interpretations of the music icons and the contexts surrounding them. In-depth investigation was made on each specific scene, including those music icons. The data categories were managed for the content analysis. To maintain the reliability of the translation, we asked two language experts to justify the accuracy.

4.1 *The God Indra Playing the phin*

The finding shows that the God Indra with a *phin*, which depicted the green-skinned god playing this three-stringed lute, was the most frequent icon, having been found in seventeen of the temples. The *phin* is a type of lute with a pear-shaped body, found in the north-eastern region of Thailand and primarily played by northwesterners and the Laos (Pidokrajit 2012). It has frets on the neck over which two or three metal strings are plucked with a plectrum. According to the Office of the National Culture Commission Ministry of Culture (Thailand), the *phin* icon has been part of Thai regional music in Northeast Thailand, also referred to as Isan, Thailand’s largest region, occupying the Khorat Plateau of Nakhon Ratchasima.

The allegories of the *phin* icon symbolize the Buddhist religion by way of the text printed on some of its sides. In this way, it reflects Buddhist teachings. For example, the image marked the three strings as the representation of the three states, including “too loose,” “middle way,” and “too tense,” connotating

a Buddhist doctrine. Most of these temples were constructed during the Ayutthaya period and the design is still apparent to this day. This calls to mind the claims of Wellek (1951) that “an allegory, a symbolic unit, preserves its meaning when taken from its context” (p. 121). In this case, the *phin* icon has been contextualized in the Thai context in a manner that is fairly different from the *phin* in other Buddhist regions or countries, such as the *phin* icon of India.

In this case, the symbol of the *phin* icon, represents the “Middle Path.” Before reaching the state of liberation or enlightenment, the Buddha struggled in finding a way through. This predicament involved both extremes of sensual indulgence – too loose or too tense – so that, for the Buddha, finally finding the middle way proved to be the solution (Tatana 2006).

According to the contextual analysis, the God Indra’s costume, a magnificent Thai traditional body chain, ornaments and clothing, mirrors the king’s costume in the Rattanakosin period as well as the Thai belief borrowed from Hinduism which considered Thai kings to be god-like. Additionally, the God Indra in Thai murals also symbolizes the strong influence of Hinduism. Traditional Thai art is primarily composed of Buddhist art and scenes from the Indian epics, reflecting Thailand’s civilized and artistic culture. As shown in Figure 2, the painting’s delicate implementation of strokes and contours indicates a royal artist made this piece of work (Fine Arts Department 1999; Nutcharoenpol 2011).

TABLE 3 Additional elements of analysis

Additional Elements of Analysis	Explanation
Social context	Interpretation of social features of the icon surroundings
Cultural context	Interpretation of cultural features of the icon surroundings
Painting style	Interpretation of art features of the icon surroundings that were related to a particular point of time.
Ethnic representation	Interpretation of ethnic representations of the icon surroundings



FIGURE 2 Picture of the God Indra playing the *phin* (Traitrung, Ploymong 26 November 2019)

Most of the interviewed participants indicated the God Indra playing a *phin* was a symbol of liberation for them, as two of them said:

As we have all known, the images were about taking the middle way in living life.

KHUN ANAN, art expert, 56 years

The three strings represent not taking too strict a way, nor too loose a way, but the middle way which can lead to the path towards the liberation of life and the reach of enlightenment.

KHUN SANTI, music expert, 61 years

Two experts in Thai classical visual art and history (Khun Korkiat, 51) also explained the influence of Hinduism in Thailand after Hindu merchants came and how Thai society in the past was a mix of Buddhists and Hindus. However, Thai kings were staunch Buddhist practitioners, though the royal ceremonial priests were Brahmins, executing the royal ceremony in Hindu ways. This explains why the God Indra playing a *phin* wears the king's costume (Fine Arts Department 1999; Nutcharoenpol 2011). In addition, the Buddha's dress seen in the paintings is similar to that of Buddhist monks of the Dhammayuttika Nikaya branch practiced by ethnic Mons. Here, the robe was usually diagonally draped over the left shoulder. Further, this image was collected from Khong

TABLE 4 Summary of the God Indra playing the *phin*

Identification	Explanation
Music icon	Lute with a pear-shaped body with three strings
Allegories	Represent the three stars of Buddhist doctrine
Symbolic representations	Liberation or enlightenment (middle way of living)
Social context	The God Indra's costume is associated with the Thai kings' costumes from the Rattanakosin period. People believe the king to be a great god.
Cultural context	The God Indra is a Hindu god. The icon reflects Buddhism in Thailand, having a strong Hindu influence.
Painting style	Traditional Thai art is primarily composed of Buddhist art and scenes from the Indian epics, reflecting Thailand's civilized and artistic culture influenced by Indian culture.
Ethnic representation	<p>The Buddha image draping diagonally the upper robe (in dark brown color) over the left shoulder and under the right armpit represents the Dhammayuttika Nikaya, reflecting Mon ethnic identity.</p> <p>Buddha reclining postures in Mon style were also representative of Mon identity.</p>

Kharam Temple, the center of a Mon community. The inhabitants, who had migrated from Burma, were strong Buddhist practitioners. The color of the robe was distinctive in its dark brown shade, a departure from the common yellow or orange robes. The Mon Buddha image was commonly in reclining posture, as normally seen in Mon temples and identically to the *Shwethalyaung* Buddha in Myanmar. These records were mentioned in the Royal Chronicles of Rattanakosin (Royal Academy 1929) during the reign of King Rama III and IV, when Dhammayuttika Nikaya thrived.

4.2 *The Piphat Ensemble*

From our data collection, the *piphat* ensemble was found to be the second most frequently drawn instrument in mural arts. A *piphat* is a Thai traditional ensemble which features wind and percussion instruments, including *pi nai* (bass oboe), *khong wong* (a circle of gongs), *ranat ek* (high pitched xylophone),

taphon (a barrel-shaped and two-faced drum), *that* (a pair of large barrel-shaped drums) and *mong* (a medium-sized hanging bossed gong). Each of these types signifies specific elements and history (see the compilation of Miller 2017; Shahriari 2006; Siam Society 1939). With these six types, four instruments have been observed, including *pi nai*, *khong wong*, *ranat ek*, *taphon*, *that* and *mong*. In portraying these instruments, they accompany traditional Thai theatrical and dance forms, including *khon* (masked dance-drama), *lakhon* (classical dance) and shadow puppet theater.

Traditionally, the ensemble performed in holy religious rituals and ceremonies for all social classes ranging from commoners to royal members. It could be accompanied by exclusive performances, e.g., a grand shadow puppet or a *khon* performance (a masked dance-drama performed solely in the royal court). Empirical data from the interviews conducted with the music and art experts show that the image usually co-occurred with the icons of the sacred divinities surrounding it. Sometimes, the divinities themselves were performers in the painting. Such a view would influence how people perceived and positioned the ensemble as a sacred element. Additionally, this element portrays religion or holy events.

The context surroundings reflected social classes in Thailand. In the image, people wear different styles of costumes. In addition, the locations of people in the image also reflect social classes.

When asked about their thoughts on this ensemble, the participants said that this kind of element is used for ritual performance. As one said:

The music was usually used when rituals were performed.

KHUN KOBKUN, music expert, 62 years

On the other hand, Khun Metha explained the sound that this element produced. He added that the music aligns with the holy ceremony. As he mentioned:

The hard and strong sounds of the music that you can hear from it signify its holy essence.

KHUN METHA, music expert, 53 years

It is believed the costumes of people in the painting identified their social classes. From the image, delicate costumes were found on those people at the center of the image in a royal palace scene. Those who went on an errand outside the palace precinct wore simpler styles of costumes. All the performers were men, a symbol of power and strength showing gender-based

TABLE 5 Summary of the *piphat* ensemble

Identification	Explanation
Music instruments and ensembles	The ensemble of <i>pi nai</i> , <i>khong wong</i> , <i>ranat ek</i> , <i>taphon</i> , <i>that</i> , <i>mong</i> and <i>trae</i> (a metal horn)
Allegories	Performance for a religious event
Symbolic representations	Religious holiness/rituals
Social context	Thai social classification, recognized by costumes Only male performers, showing the power of men (gender inequality)
Cultural context	Architecture reflecting a royal style in the early Rattanakosin period <i>Trae</i> (the metal horn was an additional percussion instrument from Western cultural influence)
Painting style	More perspectives (having three-dimensional space in painting from Western art influence)
Ethnic representation	Deco paintings made up most of the Mon murals in the temples along the Mae Klong A Chinese pavilion in the image representing the Thai-Chinese ethnic group

social roles and inequality in Thailand. For instance, Thai people considered men to be leaders of the family as they were more powerful. Further, only men were included in the musical ensemble in Thai sacred royal ceremonies. The painting style was three-dimensional, influenced by the Western works of art (see Fine Arts Department 1999; Nutcharoenpol 2011)

Regarding the artworks of the deco, it represented the Mon ethnic group and in the architecture by colors used and painting styles. A Chinese pavilion icon can also be seen in the painting. It is clear that the painting was a by-product of the mixed ethnic groups living in the community at the time. That is, this image was collected from Kasem Sarnaram Temple in Samut Songkram province, situated adjacent to the mouth of the river, which was once the main commercial hub along the waterway for Chinese immigrants. Furthermore, ethnic Mons appear in the image, as they established their settlements along the river bank during the time in which the Burmese led an army to Bang



FIGURE 3 *Piphat* ensemble on a mural (Traitrung Ploymong 13 December 2019)

TABLE 6 Summary of the image of a Brahmin priest blowing the conch shell

Identification	Explanation
Musical instruments and ensembles	Blowing a conch shell
Allegories	Performance used by the highest people in the nation
Symbolic representations	Represents the division between the royal members and the commoners/Rituals/ Auspicious occasions
Social context	Three social classes in the image include royal (king costume), Brahmin (with hair knots) and commoner (two men with no top clothing)
Cultural context	Brahmins (as part of Hinduism) have influenced Buddhism in Thailand, especially in sacred religious ceremonies and rituals
Painting features	More colors used in paintings, as a result of Western influence, with a three-dimensional perspective
Ethnic representation	The hairstyle of the two commoners represent Thai identity

Kung subdistrict in 2310 BE before King Thaksin gathered the people to build a naval fort and prevent the area from being captured by the Burmese invaders (Chutintaranon 2019). From that point, they gradually assimilated into the area, while introducing strong Mon socio-cultural infusions and influences.

4.3 *Brahmin Priests Blowing a Conch Shell*

The conch, or *conque*, also known as a “seashell horn” or “shell trumpet,” is a wind instrument originally made from a conch, the shell of several different kinds of sea snails. Their natural conical bore produces a musical tone. The bodies of large marine gastropods are blown in to produce a trumpet-like sound. Traditionally, the horn was used to give a sign or call in a particular community (Meskell 2016). A completely unmodified conch could be used, or a mouth hole created. It is likely the wooden, bamboo or metal mouthpieces could be inserted into the end of the shell to build the musical harmonic series. This conch shell as a musical instrument was originally found in Indian Buddhism, sounding in the ritual performances or royal ceremonies for blessings. In the royal courts of Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Burma, a Brahmin had dual duties, acting as a royal government official and a priest who presided over royal ceremonies and maintained the official lunar calendar. He determined when these ceremonies took place and foretold the future using astrological practices. The symbolic representation of this mural art represents the hierarchy of performance in which only the upper-class had the right and privilege to perform the ritual, segregating activities between a member of royalty and a commoner. The ritual itself symbolizes the fusion of different spiritual and religious beliefs into the Thai hybrid style.

The context of the image represents Thai social classes of the time. The presence of Brahmin priests demonstrates the Hindu influence in Thailand during the early Rattanakosin era. Here, the painting styles had more perspectives and colors.

Some participants alluded to this icon, saying:

The conch shells were used for auspicious rituals.

A local intellectual

The conch shells were particularly used when the events were performed for only kings and high royal members.

A local intellectual

It is said that the image reflects the social classes in Thailand at the time. As can be seen, the Buddha's royal costumes have delicate ornaments. This

demonstrates the patriotism of Thai people, their devotion to their kings, and their abiding by the roles of social rank. Additionally, Hinduism was infused in the image as Brahmins are depicted performing sacred ceremonies. Brahmins then became a symbol of holiness or reverence during that period and commoners were always a part of life, as observed in the color of the painting (Fine Arts Department 1999; Nutcharoenpol 2011).

The icons of the two commoners sitting in the front row represent traditional Thai ethnic identity through their traditional hairstyle of the early Rattanakosin era (i.e., the mahadthai haircut in which the sides were shaved while the top was left long). Despite being from Khong Kharam Temple of Mon community, the painting evidently spoke to the mixture of traditional Thai influence into the community.

4.4 *Mahori Ensemble*

The *mahori* is a form of Thai classical ensemble traditionally played in the royal courts for secular entertainment. It combines xylophones and gong circles – in which the *pi*, or oboe, was replaced by a Thai recorder – with the strings of the *khrueng sai* ensemble. The term refers only to a string ensemble, although it includes both string and percussion. There are three broad types of *mahori*: *mahori khrueng lek*, *mahori khrueng khu* and *mahori khrueng yai*, which can be differentiated by type of instrumentation. There were four images of the *khrueng sai* ensemble found in the study. These mainly contained *krachappi* (a plucked and fretted lute), *so sam sai* (a three-stringed fiddle mounted on a spike), *thon* (a goblet drum), and *khlui* (a vertical duct bamboo flute).

The allegory of this icon represents Thai entertainment and the ensemble for royal lullaby songs. Naga, king of the underworld, held the *mahori* ensemble to celebrate auspicious events, entertainment and relaxation. The band sometimes accompanied the shadow puppet performance or *khon* performance. If two bands were playing together, it implied that the event was organized to honor significant persons. The music itself was relatively soft and tender, suited for entertainment and lullabies (see Figure 4).

The context surrounding the *mahori* icon reflected the roles of women in Thai society in the early Rattanakosin era when women were possessed with warmth, joy and beauty.

In the interview, participants said:

The music was performed for relaxing people in the past.

KHUN METHA, music expert, 53 years

The music was taken for entertainment.

KHUN KOBKUN, music expert, 62 years



FIGURE 4 Image of a Brahmin priest blowing the conch shell (Traitrung, Ploymong 26 November 2019)

TABLE 7 Summary of Mahori ensemble

Identification	Explanation
Musical instruments and ensembles	The ensemble includes <i>krachappi</i> , <i>so sam sai</i> , <i>thon</i> and <i>khlui</i>
Allegories	Performance for entertainment in royal courts
Symbolic representations	Pleasure and relaxation
Social context	Only women performers, demonstrating the gender roles of joy, beauty, and warmth
Cultural context	Royal palace architecture and interiors Royal costumes
Painting features	More colors and a three-dimensional perspective
Ethnic representation	Mon women's costumes Mon <i>puttan</i> flower pattern on the interior temple walls Mon-style Buddhist entrance arch



FIGURE 5 Mahori ensemble on murals (Traitrung, Ploymong 26 November 2019)

According to the image, *mahori* was performed by only women in the royal court for royal entertainment occasions. It is said that the icon shows the age-old belief in women's responsibility to conform to the role of a housewife at home doing chores and pleasing their husband and family. In terms of architecture and interiors, the picture demonstrates the Thai royal palace, including a substantially high wall to protect the territory and royal family (see Fine Arts Department 1999; Nutcharoenpol 2011). Finally, the painting of the *mahori* ensemble was also brought from the Khong Kharam Temple of the Mon community. The women's costumes indicated their Mon identity in that they included a traditional shawl to wrap diagonally on their top and the *puttan* flower pattern, a specific kind of flower pattern of traditional Mon style. The Mon women's dress was infused over on images of the interior walls (Kakom 2017).

5 Conclusion and Implications

The article sheds light on how music iconology appeared on monastery murals along the Mae Klong River Basin in terms of the instruments, ensembles and their symbolic representations. In other words, the informed findings describe Thai traditional music iconology in monastery mural paintings through the lens of solemn religious belief, culture and the social realm. While the Thai murals were the by-product of migration and religious influence throughout

the Rattanakosin period, they were vigorously inspired by Buddhist beliefs and involved Thai socio-cultural dimensions. There are several characteristics in the mural paintings that prove such interconnectedness: the God Indra playing a *phin*, the musical ensembles and Brahmin priests blowing a conch shell.

The most significant icons in the enlightenment depiction were those about the God Indra playing a *phin*. The *phin* of the God Indra found in Thai mural paintings was a corollary of incessant migrations between Thailand and the Lao countryside, which influenced the belief system of the *phin* being played and displayed in those mural arts. The God Indra playing a *phin* reflected the core concept of the Buddha's teachings: the adoption of the middle way into practice (Punthawee 2011). Here, the three strings of the *phin* connote how individuals should live their life without too much attention to the two extremes of indulgence: too tense or too loose. That this is a commonly held belief by Buddhist practitioners placed the icons unquestionably in the highest frequency group.

Next, notable Thai traditional musical ensembles called *piphat* and *mahori* ensembles were present in multiple Thai social functions across different local and cultural contexts within the cycle of a person's life. Importantly, the drawing of the musical icons on the monastery murals indicated that past Thai society was divided into social classes. Here, Thai traditional music served as a tool to connect royal ceremonies of the upper-class, those residing in palaces or courts, to holiness and sacredness. In this way, ensembles such as the *piphat* came to have a more determinative aspect in which they distinguished people by their social class while, crucially, being deemed sacred and being used in a very traditional way. In contrast, *mahori* ensembles were simply used for entertainment (Wyatt 2004).

It is interesting to have found the Brahmin blowing a conch shell in Thai mural paintings. The conch, or shell trumpet, is a wind instrument that produces a musical tone. Its use signifies the auspiciousness of events associated with Indian Buddhism belief. With a strong belief in the power of the supernatural, Thais used music in cultural ceremonies, as can be seen in a significant amount of architecture. This indicates that the meaning attached to this instrument has also been embedded in Thai practice by way of adoption of Indian religious belief.

Essentially, the normative ideology of the community is visible in how Thais portray each icon in their performance in festivals or special occasions. Indeed, the allegories and symbolic representations of these murals – including the *phin*, the Thai ensembles and the conch shell – are analogous to the core teachings of the Lord Buddha. The stories told in Thai murals are strongly associated with various religious occasions and the Buddha's life cycle

until his enlightenment. The study of monotheism theory in which music and religion are observed as tools by which one can access intangible matters beyond human understanding can be corroborated by Rosen's (2014) assertion that both music and faith are based on the common ground experience of loss through the rituals of death and rebirth. This relationship is also seen as involving the spirit of the sound itself that transcends human existence. Furthermore, the compositions of the images are also infused with certain features of local cultures.

In terms of social formation, various ethnic identities, intertwined as they are with the roots and emergence of a given community, were reflected within the monastery paintings in each area. Since the current study included within its scope only monastic sites along the lower Mae Klong River Basin in Thailand, further studies are recommended in order to broaden this territory and, thereby, introduce more thorough data to the study of Thai traditional music iconology. Such data could eventually be compared to reveal differences and similarities among regions. In addition to other historical evidence and records, the compilation of traditional music iconology may serve as an effective source of historical evidence and may, therefore, be rather conducive to such research.

Acknowledgments

The authors are very thankful to the College of Music, Mahidol University in Thailand, for their academic support. Additionally, we highly appreciate the collaboration and contribution of the participants in the study.

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