

Evolving Traditions: Mon Music and Acculturation in Central Thai Funeral Practices

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Abstract: Mon cultural influences, particularly in music, hold a significant historical presence in central Thailand. The Piphat Mon ensemble, which blends traditional Mon traits with Thai court and regional music styles, serves as the primary musical accompaniment in death rituals in central Thailand. This study examines the diachronic and synchronic evolution of Mon music within central Thai funeral practices, analyzing how historical migrations, state-led concepts of “Thai-ness,” and social stratification shaped its development. Employing a qualitative historical and ethnographic methodology, data were gathered through archival research at the National Library of Thailand, observational fieldwork at funeral ceremonies across provinces in central Thailand, and semi-structured interviews with musicians, ethnic Mon descendants, government officials, and Buddhist clergy. Findings reveal that while *Piphat Mon* historically acculturated into the Thai royal and elite spheres through instrument modifications such as tuning adjustments and the creation of the *Kong Mon Wong Lek* it has undergone a contemporary functional shift. Rather than serving strictly as a sacred companion for the deceased, contemporary *Piphat Mon* ensembles, through performing the traditional *Pleng Mon* or *Pleng Thai Sumneang Mon* repertoires, have increasingly incorporated *Luk Thung* (Thai country music). This integration shifts the musical soundscape from solemn lamentation to entertainment for funeral attendees. Ultimately, *Piphat Mon* demonstrates remarkable resilience, adapting to commercial pressures and modern audience expectations while maintaining its status as a cornerstone of Thai funeral music culture.

Abstrak: Pengaruh budaya Mon, khususnya dalam musik, memiliki kehadiran historis yang signifikan di Thailand tengah. Ansambel Piphat Mon, yang memadukan ciri khas Mon tradisional dengan gaya musik istana dan regional Thailand, berfungsi sebagai pengiring musik utama dalam ritual kematian di Thailand tengah. Penelitian ini mengkaji evolusi diakronik dan sinkronik musik Mon dalam praktik pemakaman Thailand tengah, dengan menganalisis bagaimana migrasi historis, konsep “kethailandan” (*Thai-ness*) yang dipelopori negara, dan stratifikasi sosial membentuk perkembangannya. Dengan metodologi historis dan etnografis kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui penelitian arsip di Perpustakaan Nasional Thailand, observasi lapangan pada upacara pemakaman di berbagai provinsi di Thailand tengah, serta wawancara semiterstruktur dengan para musisi, keturunan etnis Mon, pejabat pemerintah, dan pemuka agama Buddha. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun *Piphat Mon* secara historis berakulturasi ke dalam lingkungan kerajaan dan elite Thailand melalui modifikasi instrumen, seperti penyesuaian laras dan penciptaan *Kong Mon Wong Lek*, ansambel ini mengalami pergeseran fungsi pada masa kini. Alih-alih berfungsi semata-mata sebagai pendamping sakral bagi almarhum, ansambel Piphat Mon kontemporer, melalui pementasan repertoar tradisional *Pleng Mon* atau *Pleng Thai Sumneang Mon*, kian memasukkan *Luk Thung* (musik *country* Thailand). Integrasi ini menggeser lanskap bunyi dari ratapan yang khidmat menjadi hiburan bagi para pelayat. Pada akhirnya, *Piphat Mon* menunjukkan ketahanan yang luar biasa, beradaptasi dengan tekanan komersial dan ekspektasi khalayak modern sambil mempertahankan statusnya sebagai pilar budaya musik pemakaman Thailand.



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INTRODUCTION

The central region of Thailand encompasses several provinces, including Bangkok, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, Ayutthaya, Samut Sakhon, and several nearby regions. The region's central location and cultural practices have been enriched by diverse influences and migration. This study focuses on funeral music practices in central Thailand. During the field observations, the music known as *Piphat Mon* appeared to represent traditional funeral music for Siamese/Thai people, noting that Siamese refers to the people of Siam before 1939, when the name of the country was changed to Thailand. Henceforth the citizens were referred to as Thai, though this article uses Siam and Thai interchangeably. We found many *Piphat Mon* ensembles performing traditional Thai music. In a broader context, the Thai populace generally perceives *Piphat Mon* as linked to the Mon ethnic group and associated with the Thai *Piphat* tradition. The Mon people's involvement intersects with that of the Thais in various cultural practices, including language, religion, attire, and culinary heritage music also plays a significant role in this connection. Essentially, central Thailand's unique musical tradition is rooted in court music that has been preserved and passed down through generations. The emphasis on traditional music in Thailand arises from the interplay of cultural dominance and sub-dominance, likely influenced by the historical relationship between the Mon and Thai ethnicities, as well as class and status factors that have shaped the development of *Piphat Mon*. The emergence of *Piphat Mon* can be traced to Mon music brought by Mon migrants over the centuries, illustrating how Mon musical traditions have been incorporated into the Thai *Piphat* tradition. This transformation has altered contemporary perceptions of Thai-ness and Mon-ness, shaping *Piphat Mon's* present status.

Relatedly, death ritual practices in central Thailand reflect how Thai Buddhist culture has adapted and evolved over a long history. Traditional music and funeral practices evolve within the rich histories of many cultures worldwide, adapting to changes, transformations, and advancements in musical composition and performance. Traditional music reflects culture and is shaped by contexts such as history, cultural values, communities, and lifestyle. Furthermore, traditional funeral music plays a vital and irreplaceable role in Thai cultural life. This passed-down musical heritage also serves as a reminder for Thais to maintain their cultural identity and safeguard their cultural heritage (Nguyen, 2024), as it provides context for symbols,

such as the significant relationships between the deceased and their community and the levels of secular and sacred authority (Hampton, 1982).

Songs symbolize essential transformations in funeral music while cultivating tradition and sanctifying the deceased. A notable shift, particularly in the blending of funeral music styles, implies the impact of religious culture. With its classical significance, funeral music embodies a cultural hierarchy that differentiates among social classes and racial groups (McCusker, 2012). In Japanese funeral traditions, the practices evolved from community-based events to those managed by professionals. After the post-war period, funerals shifted from village rites to more private family gatherings, reflecting changing social dynamics and urbanization driven by rapid economic growth (Kōkyō, 2000). Social factors influence people's lifestyles and cultural traditions. Although funeral rituals are rites for the deceased; descendants and family members who participate are also susceptible to changes in customs and practices.

The formation of music, especially in ensembles, involves developing musical elements and understanding how music evolves. Musical gestures in songs can express intricate emotions that blend, evolve, and transform over time (Robinson & Hatten, 2012). People recall song lyrics by singing them, which subtly embodies the past (Basundoro & Afdholly, 2023). According to a study conducted in the 1990s, in central Thailand, particularly around Bangkok, traditional funeral music has largely vanished and has been replaced by Mon music. Thailand underwent various cultural intersections due to foreign influences and the assimilation of external traditions. As a result, the musical practices in Thailand are connected to wider cultural phenomena involving nationalism, capitalism, and modernization (Wong, 1998).

Engagements such as music-making for community participation occur within specific historical and cultural contexts shaped by societal power dynamics and authority. Elements of music can represent the musical framework, including sounds, rhythms, tonal variations, scales, melodic patterns, tempos, and forms. Beyond musical culture and communities, factors such as social classification, hierarchies, ethnicity, and gender can also affect music creation (George, 1993). Myers-Moro (1989) noted the social stratification of Thai musicians, contrasting Bangkok musicians who maintained court traditions with rural musicians from a distinct social class. Following the Siamese Revolution of 1932, the decline of royal and aristocratic patron-

age further altered this social structure, shifting musicians toward serving public, commoner contexts.

Traditional music gained prominence as a form of national music. The concept of nation-state formation first impacted Siam during the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama V, leading to Siam's modernization, while continuing to retain strong Thai cultural sense and belonging. The monarchy was a patron of the arts; Thai musicians, too, had received patronage from the monarchy and the aristocracy. Musicians historically drew prestige from royal and aristocratic patronage. However, the rise of 20th-century modernity particularly Western popular music and the political shifts after 1932 reduced court patronage, drastically altering traditional music's character and social status. Although widely viewed as a period of decline for court-centered traditions, the legacy of royal patronage remains a historical touchstone that continues to influence contemporary perceptions of traditional Thai music.

The evolution of the performing arts reflects shifts in society and incorporates creativity through progression, variation, and modification. (Wijayanto, Sugianto, & Djuwitaningsih, 2024). Over the last two centuries, funeral practices and associated music have evolved significantly. Traditional music, which integrates cultural and religious customs, is central to this evolution. Among the various traditional music genres today, the *Piphat Mon* stands out alongside ensembles such as *Piphat Nanghong* and *Bualoy*. The fusion of Mon and Thai musical traditions has been crucial in fulfilling the requirements in funeral services within central Thai cultural settings. From foreign influences on Thai *Piphat* music, *Piphat Mon* has undergone numerous evolutionary transformations regarding its functions, musical components, and repertoire through an adaptive process. This paper investigates the role of traditional music in central Thailand and examines the changes and roles surrounding *Piphat Mon*.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative methodology that combines historical-critical analysis and ethnomusical fieldwork to investigate the acculturation, adaptation, and functional continuity of *Piphat Mon* within central Thai funeral practices. To capture both the diachronic historical trajectory and the synchronic contemporary realities of this musical tradition, the research organized data collection and analysis systematically into two distinct empiri-

cal tiers: primary historical sources and contemporary ethnographic data.

The research collected historical evidence through archival research at the National Library and the National Archives of Thailand. Key primary textual data include early Rattanakosin royal chronicles referring to the Bangkok-based Siamese kingdom under the Chakri dynasty founded by Rama I, whose traditional R.S. era dating system (1782–1913) was later replaced by the Buddhist Era (B.E.). These sources are supplemented by official administrative correspondence and memoirs such as the personal diary of Princess Narindara Dhevi, which documents late 18th to early 19th-century court performances (Narindara Dhevi, 1958). Crucially, institutional records such as the 1912 official letter from the acting governor of Pathum Thani to Chaophraya Yommarat regarding reimbursement for *Piphat Mon* musicians during King Chulalongkorn's royal funeral (Ministry of Metropolitan, 1912) provide empirical evidence of Mon ensembles' integration into formal state and court funerary rituals. In addition, local material evidence, including the 1874 bilingual Thai-Mon stone inscriptions at Poramai Yikawat Temple in Ko Kret, offers localized documentation of Mon musical performance contexts.

The historical narrative follows a chronological framework that traces four key milestones of cultural contact and institutional change. In the initial phase, spanning the early Ayutthaya to early Rattanakosin eras (16th to early 19th centuries), Mon populations migrated into Siam because of regional conflicts, which resulted in their military integration and assimilation into the Siamese court (Aung-Thwin, 2005; Foster, 1973; Wongpolgan, 2007). In this era, Mon performing arts operated as distinct ethnic traditions, such as *Mahori Mon*, co-existing alongside court ceremonies while maintaining their unique cultural characteristics (Narindara Dhevi, 1958; Lazëri, 2023).

The late Rattanakosin era (1860s to 1910s) marked a critical transition, defined by the formal integration and organological adaptation of Mon music into elite funerary rites, following the royal cremation of Queen Debsirindra, consort of King Mongkut and mother of King Chulalongkorn (Amattayakul, 2009). During this period, Mon musical traditions underwent systemic structural synthesis, characterized by the creation of hybrid instruments such as the *Kong Mon Wong Lek* and the alignment of Mon tuning with the standard Thai *Piphat* ensemble (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2024).



Figure 1. *Piphat Thai* at the royal wreath-laying ceremony for King Rama VI (a) and *Piphat Mon* at the royal cremation ceremony of King Bhumibol (b)
Source: Nalinnipa Deethum (2023) and Ditsawat Pakthin (2017)

Following the 1932 Revolution, state-led nationalistic reforms under Prime Minister Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1938–1944 and 1948–1957) radically altered the social landscape of Thai performing arts. Political campaigns aimed at standardizing modern “Thai-ness” (*khwampenthai*) (Winichakul, 1994; Boonhok, 2024) reduced royal and aristocratic patronage (Myers-Moro, 1989), which in turn shifted Piphat Mon performance from exclusive court circles into commoner spaces and public funeral rituals. Figure 1 shows the contrast between the Piphat tradition in a royal ceremony, represented by the Thai Piphat at the wreath-laying ceremony for King Rama VI, and the Piphat Mon ensemble at the cremation ceremony of King Bhumibol. The sequence of cultural contact that produced Piphat Mon and its development as funeral music is summarized in Figure 2.

In the contemporary era, spanning the late 20th to early 21st centuries (1960s to the present), rapid urbanization, commercialization, and the rise of *Luk Thung* (Thai country music) triggered a third major transformation (Jirattikorn, 2006; Mitchell, 2019; Wong, 1998). To interpret this long-term his-

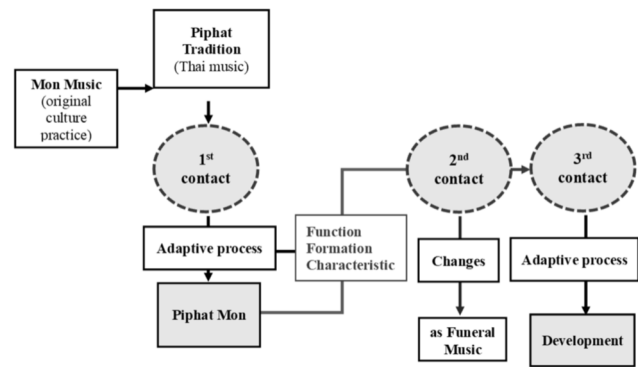


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the acculturation process between Mon music and the *Thai Piphat* tradition: the first contact produces an adaptive process that forms *Piphat Mon* (function, formation, and characteristics); the second contact brings changes as funeral music; and the third contact leads to an adaptive process and further development.

torical trajectory, the paper applies acculturation theory (Sam & Berry, 2010) to examine how dominant Thai court culture and sub-dominant Mon migrant traditions engaged in reciprocal contact. This analytical lens shows how traditional musical knowledge was continuously transmitted, modified, and re-signified (Reyes-García et al., 2016; Wijayanto et al., 2024), allowing Piphat Mon to evolve from a sacred, court-associated lamentation ritual into a flexible, consumer-driven performance tradition.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mon and Mon Music in the Early Civilization of Thailand

The Mon ruled an enormous empire in early Burma and the mainland of Southeast Asia. The concept of civilization originated with the Theravada Buddhism faith of the Mon people. Mon culture flourished in mainland Southeast Asia, encompassing

script, religion, the arts, and architecture. Additionally, Mon contributed to the history of Dvaravati (Aung-Thwin, 2005). They held significant positions and exerted considerable influence on Southeast Asia's political and cultural history. In addition, their civilization enabled the development of an educational writing system that has since influenced the Thai Buddhist learning system and continues, in present-day Myanmar (Foster, 1973). Historically, the Mon people were recognized by ethnonyms such as *Rmeñ*, *Rman*, *Man* in Burmese, *Ramañ* or *Rmmañ* in old Javanese, and *Rmēñ* or *Rēmēñ* in old Khmer (Aung-Thwin, 2005).

During the sixteenth century, the Mon began fleeing numerous wars in their homeland and sought refuge in the Ayutthayan kingdom. Over centuries of settlement, Mon descendants received Siam/Thai citizenship, making it virtually impossible to distinguish their physical appearance from that of Thais and other ethnic groups (Foster, 1973). In Southeast Asian linguistic history, Mon elements, including loanwords and syntax, have significantly influenced the customs and traditions of the Thai and Myanmar languages. Thai or Tai speakers in the Mekong and Chao Phraya River zones adopted several Mon words (Jenny, 2012). A diverse array of interactions occurs among ethnic groups as they cooperate and share economic, ecological, linguistic, religious, and musical practices; nevertheless, certain distinguishing characteristics, including attire, movements, sounds, religion, and communities, are associated with the assertion of difference in detail (Douglas, 2013).

Notably, minority influence can affect the majority's perception on several significant levels. In other words, a minority can influence the larger group (Kende et al., 2023). Several migrations in the late sixteenth century involved Mon migrants, particularly males, in recruiting Siamese soldiers for a specific department of the Mon regiment during the Ayutthaya period. The department was headed by a Mon nobleman with the rank of Chao Phaya Mahayotha during the reign of the Ayutthayan court. The military rank remained among noblemen of the Mon lineage until the beginning of the Rattanakosin kingdom under the Bangkok court (Wongpolgan, 2007). As diasporic migrants, the Mon held important positions within the Siamese military and royalty.

In the context of Mon civilization, not only did Mon ethnic groups assimilate Mon cultural influence, but other groups did too, especially those living in the lower and central Chao Phraya basin (Stadtner, 2008). Bangkok was ethnically diverse in

its first century; the first king of the Chakri dynasty, Rama I, had Mon, Persian, and Chinese ancestry. The cities of Bangkok and Thonburi were both home to minority groups. Bangkok was densely populated with multiethnic communities, including Malay, Mon, and Lao communities, as well as foreign laborers (McDaniel, 2018). One of the most prominent features that distinguishes the Mon from other Thai communities is their religion; the Buddhist Mon practice. Dhammayuttika Nikaya, the Mon lineage (McDaniel, 2018) of Theravāda Buddhism, that was established by King Mongkut (Rama IV). During his monastic years, the King authorized reforms in Thai Buddhism through a new sect in Thailand; one of King Mongkut's sons was later appointed prince-supreme patriarch of the order. The monarch supported Pali-language education for Dhammayut monks during the nineteenth century, establishing the sect as part of the inner circle of the royal monastic community (Reynolds, 2019).

Royal patronage was the most significant factor shaping relations between the nation-state and religion. Winichakul (2000) interpreted this as a civilization process. In response to colonial threats, Siamese leaders, including urban intellectuals and elites, made efforts to assert sovereignty. Siam was exposed to civilization through transculturation, which in Thai is called *siwilai*. The Siamese nobility aligned the *siwilai* concept with Buddhist doctrines, thereby raising standards of etiquette and morality. Conversely, *siwilai* also signified development or progression, and it was politicized in debates over nationalism and royalism.

Mon-centred communities are found in many provinces of central Thailand. Prominent Mon settlements include Phra Pradaeng in Samut Prakan province, Ko Kret in Nonthaburi province, Min Buri in Bangkok, and Nakhon Chum in Ratchaburi province. Perhaps among Mon successors, *Piphat Mon* is recognized for its role in performing identity, cultural heritage, ritual music, and even sacred music. Throughout history, music and dance have been part of the performing arts that the Mon people have carried with them since periods of migration. The Thai terms "*Piphat Mon*" and "*Mon Rum*" refer to Mon music and dance. Princess Narindara Dhevi, the sister of King Rama I of the Rattanakosin era, is remembered in objects that function as a memory archive. The author's personal diary documented social phenomena during her brother's reign. The archive has been published in numerous volumes and meticulously interpreted, including anecdotes from King Chulalongkorn

(Rama V). One anecdote recount seven days of festivities devoted to the relocation of a Buddha statue (Sri Sakyamuni) from Sukhothai to the Suthat Thepwararam temple in Bangkok.

“On Thursday, the 1st month, the waning moon on the 2nd night moved the Buddha statue, celebrated by Gongs and Drums joyfully and rambunctiously. There were Chinese, Thai, Kheak, and Mon Mahori ensembles. There are theatres for Khon performance, Lakon performance, Chinese opera, Mon Rum, and Puppets ... approximately 100 ensembles of Pinphat (Piphat) musically sacrificed at Suthat temple ...” (Narindara Dhevi, 1958).

Historically, in the mid-18th century, Mon performers and musicians participated in events organized by the Bangkok court. Multicultural societies and multiethnic communities may have shaped the ambiance of early Bangkok. Entertainment was integrated with religious practices and reflected the magnificence of the nascent capital city. Meanwhile, music among the Mon people continues to support traditional Mon rituals. In the early Rattanakosin era, Mon music appears to have been recognized as originating from Mon performing arts, with the Mahori word used to describe the ensemble. Thus, Mon music was not categorized within the Piphat tradition. This indicates that Siamese (or Thai) court music is intertwined with other musical traditions while maintaining its original characteristics. While Mon music has influenced the traditional court performing arts in this era, ethnic segregation persisted. The communities were categorized as a homogeneous ethnic group versus an outgroup. Individuals can be understood within the framework of ethno-national identity, which maintains divisions between dominant and migrant populations (Lazëri, 2023).

Additionally, the Mon traits grew closer to the royal family following the death of King Rama IV's queen, whose cremation took place on 18 April 1862. The expansion of *Piphat Mon*'s function in central Thailand since the Bangkok period, before the Siamese revolution, was discussed in 1940 in correspondence between two learned princes, Prince Naris and Prince Damrong. Prince Naris was invited to attend the cremation of a royal family member at a monastic pavilion, where *Piphat Mon* accompanied the funeral. He found the funerary ensemble unusual, since *Piphat Nanghong* had been the familiar repertoire to him, and he wondered why *Piphat Mon* had replaced it. Prince Damrong believed that *Piphat Mon* was first presented at the royal cremation of the late Queen Debsirindra

Table 1. Verse 22 of the Poramai Yikawat Church inscription: Thai original and English translation

Inscription	English translation
๒๒ มหรรศพครบเครื่องฟ้อน ประจำงาน	Fully entertaining performances of the event
โขนหุ่นละครงาน พาทยฆ้อง	Khon, puppet, dramatic play, and (Pi)phat and gong
มอญร่ำรำการ จำวาด เอิกเกรย	Mon dances and comedians were boisterous
ครั้นคลุกก็ก็มีก้อง จวบสิ้นการฉลอง	Be jolly, rambunctious, and festive throughout the event

Source: Stone inscription at Poramai Yikawat Church, Ko Kret (fieldwork, 2023); English translation by the authors.

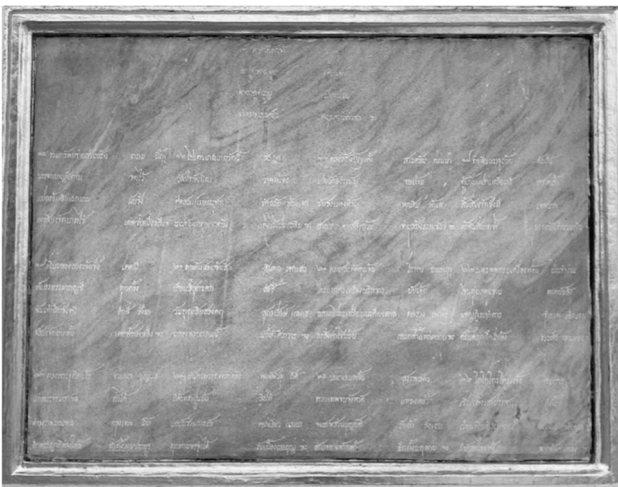
because she was of Mon lineage. Upper-class people in Bangkok later embraced *Piphat Mon* after it was used in royal events such as funerals (Amattayakul, 2009).

A significant piece of evidence is the stone inscription at the entrance of Poramai Yikawat Temple in the Ko Kret area (Figure 3). Written in Thai and Mon scripts, it records the renovation of the monastic church during the reign of King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) in 1874. The marble inscription is composed in quatrain poetry, and its 22nd verse describes a festive event marking the church's reopening after the renovation. A year later, King Chulalongkorn ordered a celebration at the temple, in which Mon dances were prominent performances, as the verse shows (Table 1).

The brief descriptive lines in the inscription highlight the significance of Mon dance, which originated in Mon tradition, during the celebration. Although the music is not explicitly described, the terms “phat” and “gong,” mentioned alongside Mon dance, likely refer to the Mon ensemble later known as *Piphat Mon*, with the gong as its primary instrument. *Kong Mon* and *Tapone Mon* are two significant instruments in Thai music that hold an important place in Mon musical tradition. Historically, the Mon performed with these instruments, locally called *Pat Gang* (chime of gongs) and *Tapern* (barrel drum). The *Tapone Mon*, a sacred two-headed drum mounted on a wooden stand, is considered a central ritual instrument. According to Mr P1, a Mon descendant who still speaks Mon and is knowledgeable about ancient Mon palm-leaf scripts and Mon Buddhist practices, the drum is integral to Mon musical practice. He recalled that in his childhood, whenever music was to be played, the Mon people prayed to the *Tapone Mon* to invite the instrument from their home to the performance venue, out of respect for its sacredness. Although the instruments were later blended into a distinctly



(a)



(b)

Figure 3. Poramai Yikawat Church (a) and the stone inscription (b) (Source: Chayuti Tassanawongwara, fieldwork (2023))

Thai musical setting, reflected in their Thai naming, the Thais deliberately kept the term “Mon” to highlight Mon characteristics, as in *Kong Mon*, *Tapone Mon*, and *Pi Mon* (the double-reed instrument).

***Piphat Mon* Formation and Establishment in Thai Funerals since the Early 1900s**

The *Piphat Mon* largely met the musical needs of court ceremonies, particularly funerals and crema-

tions. In the year 130 of the *Rattanakosin* era (1912), a significant document surfaced: a collection of letters written by the acting governor of Pathum Thani province, addressed to Chaophraya Yommarat (Mr Pan Sukhum), minister of the Metropolitan Ministry, dated 22 April 1912. This occurred two years after the royal cremation of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The acting governor requested reimbursement for payments made during the royal funeral and cremation, mentioning that the province had advanced the musicians' wages. There was an order for the acting governor to enlist *Pinphat* (old term for *Piphat*) Mon musicians from *Pathum Thani* to perform at the royal events held in the Royal Hall of *Dusit Maha Prasat* and at the *Sanam Luang* royal crematorium. The letter mentioned that the metropolitan ministry owed Pathum Thani province 167.84 Baht. The acting governor assembled a group of 15 skilled musicians for the *Pinphat Mon Kruang Yai* ensemble, and they performed for four days at the royal funeral and cremation (Ministry of Metropolitan, 1912).

From a historical perspective, the *Thai Piphat* tradition was likely previously referred known as ‘Pinphat,’ a term also associated with Mon music. It was later adapted into the *Thai Pinphat* setting. Notably, during King Chulalongkorn's funeral, *Pinphat Mon* was positioned within the *Thai Piphat* formation. For example, the term ‘Kruang Yai’ which literally translates to ‘large-size instruments’ denotes the presence of the greatest number of instruments in a *Thai Piphat* arrangement, consisting of *Kong Mon Wong Yai*, *Pi Mon*, *Tapone Mon*, *Mhong Mon*, and *Perngmang Kok* from Mon influence, and Thai musical instruments such as *Ranad Ek*, *Ranad Thoom*, *Ranad Ek Lhek*, and *Ranad Thoom Lhek*. Nevertheless, *Kong Mon Wong Lek*, or a smaller (*lek*) *Kong Mon*, is a special case.

The adaptive process in the Thai-Mon community has led to the notable development of the musical instrument known as *Kong Mon Wong Lek*. This instrument combines the design of the *Kong Mon* with the functional attributes of the *Thai Piphat's Kong Wong Lek* instrument. The traditional gongs, originally placed on a horizontal wooden rattan rack, have been redesigned on a vertical rack of carved wood, effectively transitioning from *Kong Wong Lek* to *Kong Mon Wong Lek*. The concept is rooted in the *Thai Piphat* tradition, which pairs larger gongs (lower tone) with smaller ones (higher tone), and vice versa. The creation of *Kong Mon Wong Lek* represents an attempt to integrate Mon characteristics into the structured musical system of Thai culture (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2024).

The Thai Piphat tradition appears to have been supplemented by an embrace of Mon music integrated into Thai musical performances. *Piphat Mon* is recognized by the ethnic label of the region of origin Mon. Subsequently, this "impure" Thai music, known as *Piphat Mon*, appears to be constructed as both a Thai and Mon adaptation, including in its use of musical instruments. Additionally, it points to the campaign of true Thai-ness, or *khwampen-thai*, promoted during Phibun's administration and exemplified by the cultural mandate known as *Rat-niyom* (Winichakul, 1994). In this phase, Thai-ness is redefined as part of a state ideology essential for a modern centralized Thai nation. Thai-ness embodies the quality of being Thai through distinct Thai characteristics that define belonging to the Thai nation, and it is also used to maintain power and submission to the centralized state (Sattayanurak, 2002). Using or constructing ideologies for political purposes is not exclusive to Thailand. In Indonesia, the Pancasila was redefined during the de-Sukarnoization period to impose a central hegemonic authoritarian government system (Karjono et al., 2024).

In Thailand, the ideal of Thai-ness is preserved through traditional practices while embracing modern influences and viewing other characteristics as elements of foreign culture. (Boonhok, 2024). However, the concept of "Mon-ness" in Piphat Mon is deeply ingrained in practice through the organological instruments. When the Piphat Mon setting met the conventional requirements, it resembled the norms of the Thai Piphat setting. The acceptance of Thai influences can be infused with Thai-Mon traits. The ensemble formation harmonized with the Thai musical tradition, where the *Piphat Mon* functions as a musical tradition linked to Thai funeral practices. There are two main adaptive integrations for blending Mon into Thai music culture: (1) incorporating Thai musical elements such as the Thai tuning system and ensemble formation, and (2) preserving Mon features like the artistry of Mon-crafted instruments and traditional Mon repertoires.

Mon repertoires are also considered part of Mon heritage. It is challenging to categorize Mon's authentic repertoires among the numerous songs performed in the Piphat Mon custom. Nevertheless, Thai musicians, particularly Piphat practitioners, are acquainted with two types of songs: Pleng Mon and Pleng Thai Sumneang Mon. First, Pleng Mon refers to a traditional set of songs that are believed to have been passed down from the original Mon forefathers and maintained through memorization

to the present day. The Mon language is evident in the names and lyrics of the compositions, as well as in their musical forms and structures. Secondly, Pleng Thai Sumneang Mon refers to traditional Thai musical compositions performed in a Mon accent. Mixing foreign elements, such as melodic phrases or rhythmic patterns, into Thai musical compositions is known as Sumneang, or accent composition (simply Sumneang Phasa/language accent). Sumneang Mon refers to musical phrases and drumming patterns reminiscent of Mon music, but it is not intended to represent the authenticity of Mon-ness in melody. In terms of musical repertory, *Piphat Mon* and melodies shared functions. *Pleng Mon* is mainly appropriated in funeral services, specifically, for example, *Pracham Wat*, *Pracham Baan*, *Yok Sope*, and *Fai Sum*. *Pracham Wat* serves a function similar to that of the overture and postlude in a temple funeral setting. By contrast, *Pracham Baan* is performed at home funerals. *Yok Sope* is a song that is performed during funeral ceremonies to accompany the transfer of coffins to the crematory. Likewise, *Fai Sum* is performed during the cremation. Therefore, *Pleng Mon* is largely restricted to funeral performances. The sound of *Pleng Mon* appears to symbolize mortality and dying, and it is occasionally stereotyped as a source of sorrow. In Thai culture, playing *Pleng Mon* in the house and practicing it are considered prohibited. *Pleng Mon* likely signifies sacredness, fright, grief, and lament.

Consequently, *Pleng Mon* appears in the *Piphat Mon* performance, while another Mon-like composition, known as Pleng Thai Sumneang Mon, developed within Thai musical technique and form. Sumneang Mon has evolved into an adaptable form used in other traditional ensembles, including the Mahori and Kruangsai ensembles, as well as in the Thai Piphat tradition. Sumneang Mon mimics Mon feelings' and has become a compositional method, incorporating Mon senses to Thai repertoires. One source of Mon musical knowledge was learning Kong Mon melodic techniques and drumming patterns by imitating Pleng Mon traits, but within Thai traditional composition. Sumneang Mon has been structured to encompass many foreign-accented compositions within the Thai music tradition. Traditional ensembles frequently perform Sumneang Mon repertoires to distinguish Mon ethnicity from other nationalities. The creative compositions in both Pleng Sumneang Mon and the continued performance of Pleng Mon suggest the significant presence of Piphat Mon within central Thai funeral traditions.

Table 2. Three contemporary Piphat Mon ensembles in central Thailand and their adaptation strategies

Ensemble (Location)	Primary Focus and Aesthetic Lineage	Adaptation Strategy	Cultural and Economic Function
Duriya Praneet (Bangkok)	Conservative preservation: institutional court-lineage heritage	Strict adherence to traditional Piphat Mon repertoires; minimal commercial compromise	Preserves sacred, classical ritual identity; supplies musicians to government and academic institutions
Puangsuwan Silp (Pathum Thani)	Partial (bi-musical) adaptation: inherited family business relying on freelance musicians	Hybrid approach: retains Pleng Mon for formal rites and inserts Luk Thung suites during non-ritual hours	Balances ritual duty with client satisfaction; uses basic electronic amplification
Withun Banleang (Samut Songkhram)	Full commercial modernization: "String Mon" (Mo String) style	Complete secularization: adds electric drum sets, bass guitars, dynamic lighting, and full Luk Thung sets	Operates as high-energy funeral entertainment; prioritizes live audience satisfaction and digital monetization

Source: Authors' fieldwork and interviews (2023–2024)

Contemporary *Piphat Mon* of Central Thai Society

After *Piphat Mon* established itself within the Thai musical tradition, Mon music evolved into a hybrid, Thai Mon performance art. In contemporary central Thai society, the persistence and transformation of *Piphat Mon* reveal how traditional music navigates broader socio-economic shifts. Historically bound to royal court patronage and elite rituals, *Piphat Mon* transitioned after the Siamese Revolution of 1932 into music serving the general public, specifically fulfilling the ritual needs of commoner funerals. Unlike formal Thai classical ensembles, which carry rigid court protocols and sacred boundaries, *Piphat Mon* has structural flexibility that makes it more adaptable to changing societal tastes. In recent decades, this adaptability has culminated in a profound transformation: the integration of Luk Thung (Thai country music), the re-engineering of ensemble arrangements for presentational spectacle, and a fundamental shift in the ritual purpose of funeral music.

The emergence and dominant influence of Luk Thung a popular music genre born from rural-urban migration and working-class experience in the mid-20th century radically redefined the soundscape of central Thai funerals. Luk Thung carries strong emotional resonance for commoners, evoking themes of locality, everyday struggle, and nostalgia (Jirattikorn, 2006; Mitchell, 2019). When *Piphat Mon* ensembles began incorporating Luk Thung melodies into their repertoires, this sparked cultural and ideological tensions between ritual sacrality and secular entertainment. Traditional *Piphat Mon* repertoires (Pleng Mon) carry sacred

weight; instruments such as the *Kong Mon* and *Ta-pone Mon* are venerated as ritual objects associated with spiritual realms and death rites. Historically, playing *Pleng Mon* evoked solemnity, grief, and fear. However, as contemporary audiences began demanding recognizable, comforting popular tunes, *Piphat Mon* practitioners faced an economic and aesthetic dilemma: preserve sacrality at the risk of commercial obsolescence, or secularize the ritual to survive. This socio-economic spectrum and cultural transformation are clearly illustrated by three contemporary *Piphat Mon* ensembles in central Thailand, each representing a distinct degree of adaptation (Table 2).

The Duriya Praneet house in Bangkok represents the conservative, preservationist pole. Steeped in over a century of classical heritage, its master-student lineage feeds directly into government arts departments and formal institutions. Here, *Piphat Mon* is treated as an authoritative classical tradition in which sacred protocols and strict musical structures are safeguarded. Commercialization takes a back seat to maintaining artistic purity and historical authenticity.

In contrast, the Puangsuwan Silp band of Pathum Thani exemplifies a pragmatic, bi-musical compromise. Operating as a part-time business that hires freelance musicians from various musical backgrounds, the band owner recognizes that traditional *Pleng Mon* repertoires no longer interest contemporary funeral hosts or attendees. To satisfy client expectations while respecting tradition, the ensemble operates on a dual track: it performs solemn, classical Mon repertoires during formal ritual moments, such as coffin transfers and cremation



Figure 4. Puangsuwan Silp Piphat Mon band performing at Don Yai Temple, Pathum Thani (Source: Chayuti Tassanawongwara, fieldwork, 2024).



Figure 5. *Piphat Mon* performed by the Withun Banleang band (“String Mon” style) at Krasakhao Temple, Samut Sakhon, Thailand. (Source: Chayuti Tassanawongwara, fieldwork, 2024).

rites, but transitions seamlessly into *Luk Thung* and *Sumneang Mon* suites during casual social periods. By introducing electric amplifiers and speakers, Puangsuwan Silp transforms the funeral space into a semi-concert environment without fully abandoning its ritual roots (Figure 3).

The far end of this transition is embodied by the Withun Banleang band of Samut Songkhram, creators of the radical “String Mon” (*Mo String*) performance style. Established in 2015, this ensemble discarded conventional norms in favor of striking visual presentation, amplification, and full-spectrum pop hybridization. By integrating electric bass guitars and full Western drum kits directly into the *Piphat Mon* instrumentation, Withun Banleang redefines the ensemble as a hybrid pop orchestra. The band’s leadership defends this departure from tradition with the economically pragmatic phrase “for mouth and stomach,” acknowledging that fi-

nancial survival in the modern music market requires total audience engagement. The stage setup in Figure 5 shows the result: a row of gong circles decorated with purple fabric and flowers stands across the stage under a covered pavilion, flanked by speaker stacks, amplifiers, and lighting rigs.

From a cultural history perspective, “String Mon” represents the ultimate secularization of Thai funeral music. Historically, funeral music served as a sacred companion to the soul of the deceased (*phu tai*), guiding the departed through transitional spiritual realms through solemn lamentation. Under the “String Mon” paradigm, the primary audience shifts entirely from the deceased to the living attendees. Funeral hosts hire bands like Withun Banleang not to evoke grief, but to provide hospitality, relieve sorrow, and project social host status through high-energy entertainment. Audiences reward this performance directly through cash tips (gratuity money) and online engagement, enabling the band to perform over 100 commercial gigs annually.

Ultimately, the evolution from conservative preservation (Duriya Praneet) to hybrid adaptation (Puangsuwan Silp) and full secular entertainment (Withun Banleang) demonstrates the dynamic resilience of *Piphat Mon*. While traditional Thai classical ensembles have struggled to remain commercially viable outside state patronage (Myers-Moro, 1989), *Piphat Mon* has survived precisely because it commodified and adapted to the popular culture of central Thailand (Wong, 1998). Through the “String Mon” phenomenon, the tradition successfully negotiated the transition from a court-derived, sacred death ritual into a negotiated, consumer-driven expression of contemporary Thai-ness (Boonhok, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This form of evolution has rarely occurred in Thailand’s traditional music, particularly in the *Piphat* tradition. The deep roots of this musical heritage fostered a conservative aspect closely tied to nationalist concepts. Due to a lack of substantial historical documentation, the precise function of Mon music in 18th-century Siamese society remains difficult to establish. Nonetheless, Mon performing arts gained clear historical recognition during major court events, such as the 18th-century celebrations for the Sri Sakyamuni Buddha statue. Mon music prospered, notably during the royal cremation of the Queen in 1861-1862, under the reign of King Rama IV. Over time, the *Piphat Mon* style became associated with court traditions. Dur-

ing this period, Thai and Mon musical instruments likely mingled, changing the Thai tuning system. The popularity of Piphat Mon spread throughout central Thailand, particularly in Bangkok and its surrounding areas. The Piphat Mon incorporated Thai repertoires as the tuning system adapted to Thai standards. It even gave rise to compositions that blended both styles, known as Sumneang Mon repertoires.

The adaptation process centered on the music's ritual purpose. The rise of Luk Thung in the 1960s, and peaking in the 1990s, brought significant changes to Piphat Mon music. Many Piphat Mon ensembles noted that Luk Thung has significantly influenced their performances. Initially, Piphat Mon repertoires served funerals in Thai society and rituals specific to Mon society. However, the advent of Luk Thung has shifted the focus of this ritual music toward entertainment over the last 20 years, as it has proven more effective at engaging audiences.

To blend with Thai musical instruments, Mon instruments were infused with Thai musical tunes. As a result, the Mon instruments became Thai-sounding. The urban middle class of central Thailand supported Piphat Mon in the Thai funerary tradition, where it served as music for death. In this view, the Piphat Mon is depicted as a fusion of Thai and Mon music, with a preference for the term "Mon" over "Thai." In contrast, this paper discussed the Thai music context in Piphat Mon. Thai people viewed the Piphat Mon exclusively for death events because of its funeral function, which also strongly shaped their attitude toward sadness. Piphat Mon is the only traditional music that has adapted over time in the Thai context.

The ritual function of funerals has been turned into entertainment. The musical function of accompanying the departed body as a companion has shifted into a service for listeners or attendees at funerals. Luk Thung is presently significantly impacting funeral events in central Thailand. The sense of sadness that once characterized Piphat Mon is now diminishing. Even though not all music houses or bands perceive Luk Thung as suitable for mixing with Piphat Mon, Luk Thung is inevitably a popular Thai music. As a result, the Piphat Mon circle draws on a variety of musical genres, including conservative tracks, bi-musical tracks, and string Mon tracks. Luk Thung is a prime example of how music can reflect Thai identity and nationhood, sitting at the intersection of modernity, authenticity, and Thai-ness, and illustrating hybridity.

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