



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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FOLK MUSIC OF THE KHMER ETHNIC GROUP IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM – A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the researches on folk music of the Khmer ethnic group in Southern - Vietnam. The studies on Khmer folk music conducted by Cambodian Khmer and Western authors are also summarized in this article. The results of the literature review show that: (1) Studies on folk music of the Khmer ethnic group in the South Vietnam were carried out after 1975, especially after the Doi Moi period in Vietnam in 1986 in association with the state's policy on conservation and promotion of traditional art forms of ethnic minorities, however, the publications are mainly in Vietnam; (2) Studies on folk music of Khmer people in Cambodia has been researched and published by Western authors in many specialized scientific journals, but most of these studies do not pay attention to folk music of Khmer people in Southern Vietnam (3) The article also has not found specific studies on the correlation between folk music of Khmer people in Southern Vietnam and folk music of Khmer people in Cambodia.

KEYWORDS: Folk music, folk songs, Khmer people, musical heritage.

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Introduction

Folk music of the Khmer ethnic group in Southern Vietnam is a typical genre in the traditional art forms of the Khmer. During its formation and development, along with the process of co-living with other ethnic groups in Southern Vietnam, the Khmer people have constantly acquired and created more musical instruments and folk songs to express their feelings, practice religious rituals, entertain and compete in social activities... Therefore, folk music has been an indispensable part of the Southern Khmer people in Vietnam. Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam builds up people's spirit to overcome real-life problems; educate people and create cohesion among members of the ethnic community and different ethnic groups in the society. No doubt folk music has made an important contribution to the creation of the identity and cultural values of the Southern Khmer. In recent years, Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam has been generalized, introduced, and researched with some achievements witnessed. However, there is a need for more attention and proper investment for this genre due to its huge potential compared with others such as Du ke, the arts of Khmer pagoda architecture and Khmer dance in Southern... which caused by many different reasons. In order to evaluate the achievements and identify the issues related to Khmer Southern folk music that needs to be collected, introduced, and researched, this paper summarizes the works of collecting, introducing, and researching Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam.

In the context of international integration affecting different fields, folk music of ethnic minorities in Vietnam in general, and Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam in particular are facing the danger of disappearing from community life due to the change in living and working environment, from such environments, the folk music is born, formed and nurtured. Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam also faces the risk of extinction due to the turning of the subject created itself, because the artisans are getting older and older without heirs... On a faster and less noticeable extent, it is recognized that Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam is also facing the risk of losing its identity due to acculturation with foreign music, and is showing other signs of changes from before... In the current period, the research and introduction of folk music of ethnic minorities not only timely contribute to preserving cultural musical heritage, reducing the extinction of heritage but also contributing to building Vietnamese culture which is unified, diverse, and imbued with national identity. In order to identify the achievements as well as the issues that need to be continuously implemented in the work of collecting, introducing, and researching Khmer folk music in the South of Vietnam, the article makes an overview of studies on folk music of Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, as well as summarizes the studies on Khmer folk music by Cambodian Khmer and Western authors in general.

Method

Ethnographic field-visit method

In order to collect and learn about Khmer folk music in the South of Vietnam, it is necessary to learn about the characteristics of the culture where those musical works are born. Therefore, the ethnographic field-visit method helps to penetrate deeply into the cultural environment of the birthplace and nurture the folk music of the Southern Khmer. At the same time, the field-visit method also helps researchers penetrate deeply into different community groups and individuals in society. This study utilized the ethnographic field-visit method at 10 southern provinces/cities of Vietnam in which there are many Khmer people living. In addition, the study was carried out in some other places in Cambodia where there are activities related to preserving and promoting outstanding culture and arts such as Cultural Village (Siem Reap), the model of preserving and promoting folk music at Cambodian Living Arts (Siem Reap), the model of preserving folk music at Angkor Wat complex (Siem Reap), Royal University of Phnom Penh, the model of preserving folk culture and art at the National Museum of Cambodia (Phnom Penh). The Ethnographic field-visit was conducted in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 on the targeted participants of people, artisans, artists, researchers, and managers. From the trip-surveys at localities in and out of Vietnam, the author has collected research materials on the traditional music of the Khmer-Vietnamese as well as the traditional music of the Khmer-Cambodian. By using the techniques of analyzing and synthesizing data, the achievements as well as the remaining limitations in the research on the traditional music of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam had been identified.

Expert interview method

It is obvious that in-depth knowledge of folk music is required to annotate places, names, languages, legends..., to classify folk music works, to identify cultural values and to propose a system of solutions to preserve and promote the cultural values of the Southern Khmer folk music. Therefore, it is of great necessity to consult experts in each field to ensure the science and accuracy of the research. During the implementation of the research, the author conducted in-depth interviews with experts on Khmer folk music in the South. They are researchers, artisans, artists, managers in the field of Khmer folk music in the Southern region. In addition, the research team organized 02 seminars, 02 scientific seminars at Tra Vinh University in 2019, 2020 to collect information from experts, artisans, artists, managers, individuals, and stakeholders who have understanding and interest in Southern Khmer folk music.

Results and discussion

Studies on folk music of Southern Khmer people published in Vietnam

Before 1975, Vietnamese researchers had carried out many pieces of research on Southern Khmer culture and arts. The works *The Vietnamese Khmer* by Le Huong (Van Dan Publishing House, Saigon, 1969), *Chan Lap Phong Tho Ki* by Chu Dat Quan, translated by Le Huong (New Era Publishing House, Saigon, 1973) were worth mentioning. Those scientific works had only given a general overview of the Southern Khmer people, as well as their customs and habits; the traditional folk music aspect, however, was not included. During this period, the work *Monograph on folk music in Vietnam* by Pham Duy (Modern Publishing House, Saigon, 1972) directly referred to this issue. It is a two-hundred-page work referring to the folk music of several ethnic groups in Vietnam: the ethnic groups in the Truong Son, Northern Vietnam uplands, Cham, Kinh, and Khmer. As for Khmer folk music, the author presents musical instruments, musical languages, and musical genres of the Khmer people in the South of Vietnam.

Since the Vietnam reunion in 1975, the research on the Southern Khmer people as well as their culture and arts continued to be inherited and enhanced. Especially since Vietnam implemented the Doi Moi policy (1986), folk music of Southern Khmer has attracted more attention from domestic researchers leading to the generalization, introduction, and research on this art form. After generalizing the history of Vietnamese research works on Southern Khmer folk music, we divide the works into three main groups of issues.

The first group is about researches on Vietnamese traditional music in which Southern Khmer folk music is mentioned

There are 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, and the music of each ethnic group has its own nuances in content, expression, and performance methods... These factors create the unity and diversity of Vietnamese music culture. However, there are still many gaps in the research on ethnographic music, especially the music of ethnic minorities. Despite being researched at the early stage, the studies mainly focus on some typical ethnic music genres such as: Ca Tru, Quan Ho, Xoan singing, Vi Giam folk songs, etc. Bai Choi, Don ca tai tu, etc. Therefore, many ethnic minority music genres have not yet been fully exploited or have just been presented. This is clearly shown through statistics from the Vietnam National Traditional Music and Performing Arts database collected during the period from February to August 1999 by the Institute of Music. Accordingly, there were only 919 folk songs and 667 pieces of folk music of the Southern Khmer, Cham, and Hoa ethnic groups which is much less than that of ethnic groups in other regions such as the Kinh people (8,977 folk songs, 2,055 folk music pieces, ethnic minorities in the Truong Son - Central Highlands (1,529 folk songs, 1,374 folk music pieces, ethnic minorities in the Northern and North Central regions (5,466 folk songs) (according to Phuong Thao, 2010). Besides, there is a research category on Vietnamese folk music or traditional music which has Khmer folk music references. Those works usually focus on two main issues. One is the general studies on the folk music of the ethnic groups in Vietnam and the second is the studies on the music of individual ethnic groups in Vietnam.

Regarding the characteristics of Vietnamese folk music as well as in other Southeast Asian countries, Dao Huy Quyen, in the article "Relationship between cultures in folk music in Southeast Asia" (*Journal of Vietnam Social Sciences*, 7 (71), 2004), grouped them into seven basic characteristics: (1) Southeast Asian folk music associates with human life; (2) folk music is created by a large community without author's name or written

copy in most works but has a very high transmission power; (3) it is widely popular; (4) it is more about singing (vocal) than instrumental music; (5) musical instruments used in folk music are often rudimentary and do not need to follow any standards and forms; (6) folk music language is simple, raw, not technically sophisticated like professional music, and (7) it also has a significant social function. In this article, Dao Huy Quyen also describes some typical musical instruments of the ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, including two types of Khmer musical instruments, namely Ta Khe and Tro. Overall, the article is sketchy.

In addition, there is a database of thesis, dissertations, and conferences on folk music, and the thesis *A notation solution for Vietnamese traditional music* by Nguyen Binh Dinh (Ph.D. Dissertation of Art Studies, Vietnam National Academy of Music, Hanoi, 2010) is a typical one. The thesis surveys, summarizes, and evaluates the notation styles that have existed in the history of Vietnamese music; analyzes the current situation to find out the necessary and sufficient conditions for today's traditional music notation. Finally, the thesis proposes an innovative musical notation solution for Vietnamese traditional music. Especially there have been several specialized seminars such as the conference on “*Discussion on statistics of traditional music heritage and related issues*” organized by the Department of Cultural Heritage (Ministry of Culture and Information) in collaboration with the Institute of Music (under the Hanoi Conservatory) held in Hanoi, May 2007; the workshop on “*Professional music training in the 21st century and some issues of ethnographic music*” (Vietnam National Academy of Music, 2011).

Especially, the seminars on “*Concepts and approaches to the traditional music of ethnic minorities in Vietnam and around the world*” and “*The current situation and problems for the traditional music heritage of ethnic minorities in Vietnam today*” by the Institute of Music, Vietnam National Academy of Music held in September 2017 attracted a large number of ethnic cultural researchers such as Kieu Trung Son with the paper “*Discussing the concept and approach to the music of ethnic minorities in Vietnam through some practical cases*”, Nguyen Thuy Loan with the paper “*Discussing issues related to the musical heritage of ethnic minorities in Vietnam*”; To Ngoc Thanh with “*An approach to the traditional music of ethnic minorities in Vietnam - Current situation and problems for the traditional music of ethnic minorities today*”... These papers affirmed the diversity of traditional ethnic music as well as its unique values and significant contributions to Vietnamese arts. Besides, there are many valuable published works and online articles mentioning the values, the actual reality, and the conservation measures of the folk music assets of the Vietnamese ethnic groups such as *Vietnamese Traditional Musical Instruments* (Thegioi Publishers, Hanoi, 1994) by Le Huy, Minh Hien, *Research and training in Vietnam ethnographic music*, edited by Le Van Toan (Vietnam National Academy of Music, 2016), “*Vietnamese folk music and traditional performing arts database*” (Culture and Art Magazine, 3, 2004, pp.100-102) by Nguyen Thuy Tien, “*Preserving folk music to keep the heart of history*” (Culture and Art Magazine, 344, 2013, pp.24-27) by Nguyen Dang Nghi. Through the above studies, we found that the work of collecting, statistics making, and researching folk music heritages of the Southern Khmer is still extremely limited compared to other Vietnamese ethnic groups. The number of Khmer folk music pieces in the Vietnamese folk music database is too little, which can not reflect the reality of folk music works being circulated among the Southern Khmer people.

The second group is about the studies and collections of Southern Khmer folk songs and musical instruments

The most remarkable work in this group is a series of books researching and collecting on folk songs of ethnic groups in Southern Vietnam which were conducted in the 70s-80s of the twentieth century: *Southern Folk Songs* (Art Publishing House, 1978) by Lu Nhat Vu, Le Giang and Nguyen Van Hoa; *Ben Tre Folk Songs* (Ben Tre Department of Culture and Information, 1981) by Lu Nhat Vu, Le Giang; *Kien Giang Folk Songs* (Kien Giang Department of Culture and Information, 1985) by Lu Nhat Vu, Nguyen Van Hoa, Le Giang; *Hau Giang Folk Songs* (Hau Giang Department of Culture and Information, 1986) by Le Giang, Lu Nhat Vu, Nguyen Van Hoa, Minh Luan; *Cuu Long Folk Songs* (Cuu Long Department of Culture and Information, 1986) by Lu Nhat Vu, Nguyen Van Hoa, Le Giang, Thach An. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were works conducted on collecting and selecting Southern folk literature, these works have partly mentioned Southern Khmer folk songs such as *The Mekong Delta Folk Literature* (Vietnam Education Publishing House, 1997) by lecturers and students of the Faculty of Literature – Can Tho University; *Tra Vinh Folk Songs* (Tra Vinh Department of Culture and Information, 2004) by Nguyen Truc Phong, Lu Nhat

Vu, Nguyen Van Hoa and Le Giang; *100 Khmer folk tunes* (Tre Publishing House, 2004) by Nguyen Van Hoa; and *Bac Lieu Folk Literature* (Vietnam National University Press, Hanoi, 2011) by Chu Xuan Dien.

Basically, the series of books on folk songs of the provinces in Southern Vietnam is structured into two parts: one is a research essay which presents an overview of the folk songs of different ethnic groups and the second is a selection of texts (notations and lyrics) of folk songs. The work of *Ben Tre Folk Songs* consists of two main parts. The first part has 122 pages (pp.2-122), this is an essay that presents initial observations on the origin, genre characteristics, value of folk songs such as *ho (chanty)*, *ly, poem saying*, *hue tinh singing*, *sac bua singing*, and the relationship between Ben Tre folk songs and ethnic groups from North to South. The second part is the collection of texts. In which, the folk songs in Ben Tre are divided into three main groups: the first group is the collected folk songs (lyrics, notation), including genres: *ly* (57 songs), *ho* (21 songs), *hue tinh singing* (4 songs), *Van Tien's poems saying* (2 poems), *sac bua Phu Le singing* (5 songs); the second group is the new lyric texts (19 songs) and the third group is the composed, modified and developed texts (7 songs). However, the folk songs collected by the authors in Ben Tre are mainly the folk songs of the Kinh ethnic group, this is also consistent with the characteristics of population distribution in Ben Tre. Similar to *Ben Tre Folk Songs*, the *Kien Giang Folk Songs* work is also divided into two parts. The first part is about theoretical studies. The second part is about the texts of folk songs. Different from *Ben Tre Folk Songs*, in the work of *Kien Giang Folk Songs*, by the "Preface" article (p.7-34), in the first part, Luu Huu Phuoc presents some theoretical issues of folk songs such as the relationship between folk songs and ancient music, folk songs with folklore, characteristics of folk songs of ethnic groups, and methods of folk songs research.... The followings are the field notes and essays on Kien Giang folk songs with two basic contents: The Kinh folk songs and the Khmer folk songs. In the part of Khmer folk songs (p.153-175), the authors summarize the characteristics, content, and artistic values of Khmer folk songs. In the second part - the texts of folk songs, the authors divide the folk songs in Kien Giang by each ethnic group (Kinh, Khmer). Particularly for Khmer folk songs, the authors collected and selected 145 typical folk songs of the Khmer people in Kien Giang and divided them into genres: *Bom pe Kon* (lullaby), *Sak k-ro va*, *Um tuk* (rowing singing), *Phleng Ka* (wedding music), *Lam* (singing vocals), *Mohori*, *Bot chom*, exclusively *Komara Komaray* (children's song), and *Prophet Phxenh Phxenh* (some other genres). Similar to the previous two works, *Hau Giang Folk Songs*¹ also includes two main parts, the first part is an introduction by Tran Kiet Tuong, the preface by Luu Huu Phuoc and the research essay on the characteristics of the Kinh folk songs art. The second part is about the folk songs of ethnic groups in Hau Giang selected according to the two main ethnic groups, Kinh and Khmer. For Khmer folk songs in Hau Giang, the authors divided them into two groups: the melodies (51 melodies) and the lyrics (07 typical lyrics). For *Cuu Long Folk Songs*², the Essay (pp. 21-150) includes four chapters which present the issues of content value, artistic and musical characteristics in the Kinh and the Khmer folk songs. The section of works selection and appendices (p.151-384). Khmer folk songs are collected and classified by the authors, quite similar to the classification in *Kien Giang Folk Songs*, including specific genres: *Um tuk* (rowing singing) (3 songs), *Phleng Ka* (wedding music) (9 songs), *Mohori* (Mohori bird) (2 songs), *Bom pe* (lullaby) (2 songs), *Bot chom rieng Komara Komaray* (children's song) (2 songs) and *Prophet Phxenh Phxenh* (some other genres) (22 songs). *Tra Vinh Folk Songs* (2004) by Nguyen Truc Phong, Lu Nhat Vu, Nguyen Van Hoa and Le Giang has 85 folk songs, including genres: *Bom pe* (lullaby) (8 songs), *Bot chom rieng Komara Komaray* (children's song) (3 songs), *Sak k-ro va* (6 songs) ... (Nguyen Truc Phong, 2004). Specially, *The Anthology of Southern Khmer folk music* was collected, recorded, translated, and notated by Pham Tiet Khanh and his associates (Ethnic Culture Publishing House, 2021). This work contributes to supplementing the group of works of collection and research on folk songs, folk music of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. This musical anthology includes 185 folk songs and 24 folk music works collected in Southern provinces and cities in Vietnam where there are a large number of Khmer people living and selected from previously published works such as *Kien Giang folk songs* (1985), *Cuu Long folk songs* (1986), *Hau Giang folk songs* (1986), *Song Be folk songs* (1991), *Tra Vinh folk songs* (2004). This anthology is rich and diverse in genres. Folk songs include lullabies; singing in working; singing in daily life; singing in rituals, customs, Săk K-ro Va, etc.

1 Hau Giang province as former administrative unit, this area is now Can Tho, Hau Giang and Soc Trang provinces, Vietnam.

2 Cuu Long province as former administrative unit, this area is now including two provinces of Tra Vinh and Vinh Long, Vietnam.



Figure 1: The Arak orchestra in Kien Giang Province, Vietnam
(Photo by the author, 2019)

Folk music includes songs from the orchestras of wedding, Mohori, Arak, Sko Thum, and solo Chom rieng Cha pay. The genres of Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam have been presented in the anthology as fully as possible, some of which are of local and regional characteristics that are not available elsewhere, and some of which have been lost and are now recorded, notated for long-time preserve. Besides, there are similar songs but they are modified according to local characteristics or according to the performance style of the performers with their own breakthrough, this creates a richness in folk music. Regarding to the Khmer musical instrument in this period, the most typical works are the two studies on *Southern Khmer National Instrument* by Dao Huy Quyen, Son Ngoc Hoang, Ngo Khi by Dao Huy Quyen, Son Ngoc Hoang, Ngo Khi (Social Sciences Publishing House, 2005) and *Soc Trang Khmer National Instrument* (Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, 2007) by Dao Huy Quyen, Son Ngoc Hoang, Ngo Khi. The two studies are a systematic collection of musical instrument treasures of the Khmer people in Soc Trang Province in particular and the Southern Khmer in general. Along with the scientific classification, the authors the authors have approached and introduced in detail the origin, formation and development, structure, materials, sound color, diapason, performance technique, and the role of each type of musical instrument in the community music musical life and compared it with regional musical instruments.

In recent years, Vietnam National Academy of Music has implemented the project of “*Supporting Vietnamese culture for sustainable development 2005-2009*” funded by the Swedish SIDA Foundation. Along with the research, the collection of other ethnic groups musical art, the Khmer traditional music was carried out by the group of researchers in some provinces of Mekong Delta region.

Thematic scientific seminars on Southern Khmer culture and art such as “*The traditional Southern Khmer theater*” (organized by Soc Trang Department of Culture and Information and the Institute of Culture and Arts in Ho Chi Minh City, 1998), “*Southern Khmer Du ke Theatrical art – National Cultural Heritage*” co-organized at Tra Vinh University by the Southwest Steering Committee, the People’s Committee of Tra Vinh province and Vietnam Television (2013). In particular, two scientific seminars were within the framework of the Ministry of Education and Training’s project of “*Preserving and promoting the cultural values of Southern*”

Khmer folk music” including “*Southern Khmer folk music – Theoretical and experienced issues*”, which was held in August 2018 and “*Preserving and promoting the value of Southern Khmer folk music – Current situation and solutions*” held in August 2019 together with other scientific seminars have attracted nearly 70 reports and discussions on topics relating to Southern Khmer folk music. Some experts attended, reported, and shared their opinions about Southern Khmer folk music such as Dr. Musician Son Ngoc Hoang (Soc Trang), Meritorious Artist Sang Set (Tra Vinh), Meritorious Artist Thach Sung (Tra Vinh), Meritorious Artist Kim Nghinh (Tra Vinh), Artist Dao Chuong (Kien Giang), Elite Artisan Chau On (Soc Trang), Elite Artisan Lam Xuan (Vinh Long), Composer Thach Mu Ni (Tra Vinh), MA. Meritorious Artist Danh Nho (Ca Mau), MA. Meritorious Artist Thach Mo Ly (Bac Lieu), Journalist Ly Xinh (Southwest VTV5), etc. and scientists, who were from Ho Chi Minh City, as Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nguyen Thi My Liem, Dr. Mai My Duyen, Dr. Meritorious Artist Nguyen Thi Hai Phuong, and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Musician Nguyen The Truyen have contributed to provide theoretical issues and experiences in folk music research, cultural values of folk music, and conserving and promoting musical cultural values of Southern Khmer folk music. According to Thach Mu Ni (Thach Mu Ni, Art forms of Southern Khmer people – Current situation and solutions, 2014), the performing arts of Southern Khmer people have gained many achievements in recent years such as the staging was increasingly elaborate and more methodical, acting was more logical; many Khmer music and popular art teams have been reconstructed and developed, etc. However, the author also pointed out the reality of losing some art forms, typically *Ro bam*. The lack of diversity in art content, low art quality, limited performing skills, limited space for art dissemination, and unreasonable art dissemination channels are considered the causes of this problem. Son Ngoc Hoang (2019) analyzed the current situation of collecting, researching, and teaching Khmer folk musical instruments in the South of Vietnam. From the practical research in Kien Giang, Bui Cong Ba (2019) supposed that some genres of Khmer folk music and theater in Kien Giang province, beside the achievements, were facing with the danger of disappearing. According to Bui Cong Ba, the obsolescence in the past time was due to the unsynchronized and unscientific investigation and collection, the impact of modern lifestyle, lacking orientation, propaganda from the authorities, etc. The relationship between conservation and development, which was also mentioned in Lam Vinh Phuong’s article (Lam Vinh Phuong, 2014), Nguyen Thi My Liem’s (Nguyen Thi My Liem, 2019), Thach Mu Ni’s (Thach Mu Ni, 2019), etc. Nguyen Thi My Liem (2019) claimed that it was necessary to deal with a dialectic method between conservation and development. Subsequently, people need to preserve folk music right in the community’s life – that was “preserve life”; they, simultaneously, needed to inherit and adapt human values. Similarly, Thach Mu Ni (2019) also supported that Southern Khmer folk music needed to be preserved and developed in two directions including both keeping its tradition and improving and increasing it to follow modern trends; keeping its identity as well as receiving selectively.

The authors think that the proceedings of the scientific seminars and talks on the Southern Khmer theater art and folk music, which are mentioned above, are the valuable documents and worthy references for further studies related to folk music and theater art of the Southern Khmer in general.

The third group is about the studies to evaluate achievements, current situations as well as proposed solutions to preserve and promote the values of Southern Khmer folk music

From the two research groups summarized above, it could be seen that the folk music of Khmer people in Southern Vietnam has been introduced by many researchers in monographs but only sporadically in a few aspects (folk songs, folk music, musical instruments, orchestras, etc.) or in a particular region or locality. But there have not been many works published on the theoretical issues, which provide in forming a theoretical framework for researching, surveying, identifying, classifying, systematizing or highlighting cultural values research, investigation, identification, classification, systematization or highlighting of cultural values in order to take measures to preserve this heritage.



Figure 2: The Mohori orchestra of Khmer ethnic in Southern Vietnam
(Photo by the author, 2021)

From the Doi Moi period to present, many researchers, who based on the practice of preserving and promoting Southern Khmer cultural values, are interested in summarizing achievements, proposing solutions to preserve and promote Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam. The typical articles for this group of studies are “*Southern Khmer art from 1975 to present: achievements and prospects*” by Nguyen Dang Hai and Pham Thi To Thy, published in the Proceedings of the Scientific Conference: “*40 Years of Southern Social Sciences*” (1975-2015), volume 2, held in Southern Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City on September 19, 2015; “Training human resources for the field of Southern Khmer art in the Mekong Delta (the case of Southern Khmer Traditional Musical Instrument Performance major at Tra Vinh University)”, by Nguyen Dang Hai, Pham Thi To Thy (12/2014), in the Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference “*Eastern Music – Identity and Values*” held by Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh city; “Preserving and promoting the art of Chom rieng Cha pay of Khmer people” carried out by Thach Thi Ut Linh (2014) and “Preserving and promoting the heritage of traditional Khmer art performance by the form of training at Tra Vinh University Vinh”, by Son Cao Thang, in the Proceedings of the Scientific Conference “*Managing and exploiting of cultural heritage in the integration period*” (National University of Ho Chi Minh City, 2017), etc. The work on *Preserving and promoting the value of Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam* (Pham Tiet Khanh et al., Ethnic Culture Publishing House, 2021) contributes to providing an overview and systematic view of the Southern Khmer folk music in terms of genres, values, assessment of the current situation of cultural values of Southern Khmer folk music in recent years on the aspects of: state policy, teaching and training, researching and popularizing, and proposing solutions to preserve and promote the cultural values of Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam in current context.

Beside the research works, the conservation and promotion of Southern Khmer folk music is also carried out through Southern Khmer music performances organized by the central and local television stations. “Phum soc Identity” was seen as the typical program, which was recorded by VTV5 Southwest Station, the program introduced performance items of Southern Khmer folk music including theatrical performances repertoires (e.g., *Ro bam Yeak rom*) with the main participation of art troupes and popular art teams. In the period of two consecutive years 2018 – 2019, Soc Trang province organized two festivals of Southern Khmer folk music and dancing. These have attracted many Southern Khmer artisans and artists from the provinces in the Mekong Delta. It can be seen that television programs and festivals about Southern Khmer folk music have made a significant contribution to introducing the unique and typical folklore activities of Khmer people in the South of Vietnam, disseminating Khmer folk music and folk music works of Southern Khmer to the public, thereby making practical contributions to the conservation and promotion of folk music of Southern Khmer people.

Studies on Khmer folk music published outside of Vietnam

For works on preserving and promoting the value of Khmer folk music heritage in the South of Vietnam that have been published outside of Vietnam, Bompe Kon der Khmer in Hau Giang and Kien Giang by Jähnichen, which published on *Studies in Ethnomusicology* (1993) is known as one of the early works that introduce Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam. In this article, Khmer folk lullabies in some localities of Hau Giang and Kien Giang provinces in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam have been introduced and transcribed to Western readers. In the article of “What is known about some music features and song lyrics of the Khmer living in the South of Vietnam?”, Nguyen The Truyen (2021) introduced the themes and contents of Southern Khmer folk songs as well as identified the similarities in melody between the Southern Khmer folk songs and other ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Pham Tiet Khanh (2021) learned about the practice and transmission of traditional music in the Southern Khmer community in Vietnam and proposed recommendations for conservation and promotion of traditional musical heritage of the Southern Khmer in Vietnam in the context of current globalization. In the paper of “Enhancing human resources for the conservation and promotion of the cultural values of Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam” published in *Asian-European Music Research Journal* (Winter 2022), besides analyzing the policies of the government of Vietnam and the results of practical training of human resources to preserve and promote the cultural values of Khmer folk music heritage in the South of Vietnam, Pham Tiet Khanh proposed three solutions for enhancing human resources to preserve and promote the values of Khmer folk music and Khmer culture in the South of Vietnam (Pham Tiet Khanh, 2022).

Studies on Khmer folk music in Cambodia

The activities on preserving, introducing and resurrecting the Khmer traditional music of the Cambodian have been interested and researched by many scientists in Cambodia and other countries around the world. For works in Khmer language, the representatives of these include the early published studies of Chap Pin, Pich Tum Kravel, Hun Sa Rin and Keo Narom..., Robhash Pro Chia Pray Khmer (Khmer Folk Dance) (Phnom Penh, 1964) by Chap Pin mainly introduces the name, origin, tools - props in Khmer folk dance. In presenting about Khmer dances, Khmer folk music is also mentioned as a tool for the folk dances of the Khmer in Cambodia. The remarkable work of the Research Group on Manners and Customs, published in 1970 (Cambodia Buddhist Academy, Phnom Penh), Om Py Lôm Nom Soong Khep Nay Ph-Lênh Khmer (A Summary of Khmer Orchestras) briefly introduce nine Khmer orchestras including: Pin Piet (ancient wedding orchestra), Arak, Khloong Chhnaak, Koong Sko, Chhay Dam, Pay Keo, Koong (orchestra of the Khmer in Cambodia who live in the areas bordering Thailand) and the orchestra of the Ko La ethnic group living in Pei Lin province (Cambodia); musical instruments of strings, wind, diaphragm and reverberation; rituals and considerations when starting to learn music; folk stories related to Arak music, ancient wedding music of the Khmer in Cambodia. However, with a capacity of about 80 pages, the work is only carried out in the form of generalizing the types of orchestras and some types of Khmer musical instruments, not deeply analyzing the characteristics and functions of each type of orchestra, the way performance or crafting of musical instruments. Even so, this work still has historical significance and value for reference and comparison for later studies on traditional Khmer music when it was published quite early. Pich Tum Kravel's studies published in 1997 (Yike and Bassac theaters, Royal University of Fine Arts), in 2000 (Khmer Mask Theater, Phnom Penh) have provided basic knowledge about the traditional theater of the Khmer in Cambodia, in which the folk songs and the orchestras serving in the performance of the plays are also described in detail by the author. The work has directly mentioned the Khmer folk music as Don t'ray, Ro hash & Lakhon Khmer (Khmer music, dance and theater) (Pich Tum Kravel, Phnom Penh, 2000). In this study, Pich Tum Kravel spent 18 pages to describe the contents that relevant Khmer music, such as: names of orchestras, types of musical instruments, the arrangement in each specific orchestra, the meaning of the orchestra: A rak worship orchestra, Neakta; traditional orchestra – wedding music (Pheng Ka); Pin Peat orchestra – serving in religious rites with small Pin Peat orchestra and large Pin Peat orchestra; Mohori orchestra – serving in cheerful and upbeat atmosphere; gong – drum orchestra (serving in religious rites); Chhay Dam orchestra; the orchestra of Tream Ming or Thom Mom; the orchestra of Skô chhnas or Skôn. With two studies published in 2011, Keo Narom both conducted on the main topic of Cambodian music. In *Don Tray Nau Protês Khmer* (Cambodian music) (Nokor Wat, Phnom Penh, 2011), Keo Narom presented the role, meaning, ancestral worship rituals, ways of harmonizing, mixing, and changes of the orchestra from the past to the present, the lyrics are used

in conjunction with the orchestras: the Arak orchestra, the traditional wedding orchestra; Pin Peat orchestra, Mohori orchestra, A Day orchestra, Du Ke theater orchestra, Muon Krum orchestra. In the work of Don Tray Nung Chivit Khmer (Khmer music and life) (Chho Pon Rang Say, Phnom Penh, 2011), Keo Narom introduced the role of Khmer traditional orchestras associated with life cycle rituals, religious ceremonies, festivals, Khmer community activities, performances associated with each ritual. The two Keo Narom's works have provided detailed insight into Khmer traditional orchestras and the role of traditional music in the cultural activities of the Khmer in Cambodia, these are valuable information for reference, contributing in identifying the basic similarities and differences in the role of music in the lives of the Khmer in the South of Vietnam and the Khmer in Cambodia.



Figure 3: The Sko Thum orchestra in Ca Mau Province,
Vietnam
(Photo courtesy of baodantoc.vn)

English works of scholars studying traditional Cambodian music printed in monographs on Khmer Cambodian music, which published in Cambodia or in prestigious international journals on musicology and culture studies, they has provided quite useful information about the relationship between traditional music and cultural preservation, the transmission of traditional music between generations; in general, the training of human resources in practicing and spreading traditional arts of the Khmer in Cambodia, and their folk music in particular. It is possible to list articles such as: Khmer Music: the Foundation of Cultural Resources and Conservation (Kathy M. McKinley, 1999), The spirit's entrance: free metric solo introductions as a complex memory tool in traditional Khmer wedding music (Jähnichen, 2012), Indigenous Music Mediation with Urban Khmer: Tampuan Adaptation and Survival (Saurman, 2014). Through the case study of Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), a remarkable study of Cambodian traditional music was conducted by Francesca Billeri and published in 2017 as The process pf re-construction and revival of musical heritage in contemporary Cambodia. The study examines the incentives of the process of preservation and revival of these art forms, aiming to promote and reconstruct the traditional music, at the same time, this leads to the commercialization, westernization, “patronization” and de-contextualization of traditional music’ (Francesca Billeri, 2017, tr.92). Through the study, Francesca Billeri has provided specific evidences on the practice of preserving and promoting the traditional music in the current context of Cambodia.

Valuable studies on the reality of resources for teaching Khmer traditional music, and studies on policies and solutions have been implemented in Cambodia to maintain and revive the Khmer traditional music such

as: Transmission of Khmer Traditional Performing Arts: Its Genuineness, Challenge, and Impact on Society (Sam-Ang Sam, 2007), Perspectives of Culture-Bearers on the Vitality, Viability and Value of Traditional Khmer Music Genres in Contemporary Cambodia (Catherine F Grant, 2014), Learning and teaching traditional music in Cambodia: Challenges and incentives (Catherine F Grant, 2015). Sam-Ang Sam assumed that, in the new context of globalization and advanced technology, ‘the transmission of Khmer traditional knowledge is, in general, dwindling’, ‘a new generation—youth of the present—shuns tradition completely and practices activities that are totally nontraditional’ (2007). On the basis of assessing the transmission of Khmer performing arts by examining the effects and challenges on the process as well as its outcome, Sam-Ang Sam proposed ways of transmitting knowledge adapted to new context and challenges basing on the political, social and cultural realities of Cambodia. In two articles published in 2014, 2015, based on the results of data analyzed from interviews with the participation of a group of master-musicians, teachers and performers (Catherine F Grant, 2014), and observational data from fieldwork in 2013, 2014 (Catherine F Grant, 2015), Catherine has recognized the existing of positive signals about the revival of Khmer traditional music genres among Cambodians and pointed out the challenges, as well as the incentives for encouraging the learning and teaching of traditional Cambodian music. In this article, Catherine also detailed some solutions to overcome challenges and energize young people to learn traditional Cambodian music (2015).

The studies on Khmer Cambodian folk music, in general, have obtained many achievements, providing a multi-faceted view of the conservation and promotion activities of the Khmer Cambodian towards this heritage. Although the folk music of the Southern Khmer – Vietnam has not been mentioned, these studies have provided valuable information for reference in comparative studies between Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam and Khmer folk music in Cambodia.

Conclusion

On the basis of a summary of works on collecting, introducing and researching Khmer folk music in Southern Vietnam as well as Khmer folk music in Cambodia in recent years, the author temporarily summarize the following conclusions:

First of all, studies on folk music of the Khmer ethnic group in Southern Vietnam were carried out after 1975, especially after the Doi Moi period in Vietnam in 1986 in association with the state’s policy on conservation and promotion of traditional art forms of ethnic minorities, however, the publications are mainly in Vietnam. Most of the collected works were mainly conducted in the 70s-80s of the twentieth century. The most recent work of Pham Tiet Khanh and his colleagues, published in 2021, collected, recorded and notated about 200 folk songs and folk music of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam during the period of 2018 – 2019, but the research team has not fully surveyed the localities where Khmer people live in Southern Vietnam. Therefore, many folk songs and folk music being circulated in the Khmer community have not been collected and recorded in a timely manner, in which many genres are in danger of disappearing due to changes in the performance environment and context of community activities such as the performance of the Arak orchestra, lullabies, Dong dao and chanties.

Second, the researches on folk music of Khmer people in Southern Vietnam are mainly published in Vietnam, and only few studies in English or Khmer language published abroad. Meanwhile, studies on folk music of Khmer people in Cambodia have been researched and published by Western authors in many specialized scientific journals, but most of these studies do not pay attention to folk music of Khmer people in Southern – Vietnam.

Third, there is not any researches conducted on the comparison between the folk music of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam and the Khmer people in Cambodia. The authors believe that the findings of this article suggest new research issues that need to be carried out to compare and contrast the typical and popular folk music genres of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam and the Khmer people. These comparative studies firstly contribute to identifying the relationship of similarities and differences between the two folk music of the Khmer ethnic group developed in different cultural contexts, as well as support in identifying the origin, characteristics and changes and adaptation of Khmer folk music in the living environment of the Southern

cultural region of Vietnam.

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