

Elite Music and Nationalism in South and Southeast Asia

How Music Becomes Classical

Research >
Southeast Asia

Like related scholarly fields, ethnomusicology in the 1980s and 1990s began critically re-evaluating a series of concepts central to the field, from culture, tradition, and identity, to modernization and westernization. The disciplinary framework increasingly recognized the historical contingency and cultural construction of the very phenomena we hoped to understand. In the wake of abundant scholarship in a variety of related fields, it has become clear that ethnomusicology in fact embraced nationalism as one of its central theoretical concerns. The concepts of the canonic and the classical have been re-evaluated in recent years, in the European musical context as well as elsewhere, yet the term classical continues to be applied to certain music in Asia without a great deal of critical reflection. Whereas most contemporary ethnomusicologists would reject the notion that classical music is simply qualitatively superior to other repertoires, attempts to define the classical with regard to South and Southeast Asian music range widely.

By Pamela Moro

Some authors have isolated certain features in socio-musical context (for example, structures of patronage, methods of musical transmission, presence of articulated theory), whilst others have engaged in highly particularistic analyses of discourse. Dichotomies have been particularly compelling, such as classical/folk, urban/rural, written tradition/oral tradition and, especially in the study of South Asian music, Great Tradition/Little Tradition. Most recent evaluations consider these dyads over-simplified, helpful to a certain extent but ultimately limiting as foundations for analysis.

In my own work, the theoretical works I have found most useful are those which favour constructivist approaches. Key among these are discourse-centred studies of music by Matthew Harp Allen on India (1998), Jennifer Lindsay on Java (1985) – both of which pay special attention to shifts in vocabulary and terminology – and Partha Chatterjee on the process of classicization in general, as a deliberate and negotiated process of national culture formation (1993). To Chatterjee, a classicized tradition has been reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality, and hence made palatable for the tastes of middle class people...an appropriate content for a nationalized cultural identity (Chatterjee 1993:27). This kind of classicization is a form of sanitizing and systematizing, tied to the negotiation of history and a sense of the past, a past that, he argues, is integral to nationalism itself.

Reflecting my own interest in and familiarity with the music of Southeast and South Asia, my current work examines classicized music in India, Indonesia, and Thailand in the first half of the twentieth century during the period of emerging Asian nationalisms, or whenever the classicizing of music became prominent. My goal is to elucidate the process of classicization by comparing these three specific cases, isolating certain common factors which emerge in varying levels of intensity throughout: the rise of mass education and innovative forms of musical transmission, including the development of systems of written notation; the institutionalization of music theory and music scholarship; dynamic influences from hegemonic powers (leading to, for example, use of the Western term 'classical'); the tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity in constructions of national culture; the impact of print and electronic media, especially in relation to state power; and transformations in the roles of musician, patron, and audience. In all cases, the timing and nature of the growth of a middle class has had a tremendous impact on the position of classicized music within the nation.

High culture and the court

Since the late nineteenth century, India has offered the clearest and best-documented example of classicized music in the service of nationalism. Music that had been fostered by the princely courts (and, in southern India, the temples) was embraced by nationalists from the very beginning of the movement in the late nineteenth century. Court-fostered music – as well as new compositional forms intended specifically to arouse patriotism – was one among several aspects of culture which could contribute to a new identity, one in which a political movement towards nationalism could flourish. But the operative goals of such nationalism were to change over time, and the music had to be reshaped somewhat before it was suitable for such a project. A number of prominent music scholars and teachers of the late nineteenth century set out to revitalize what they felt had become a neglected and tarnished musical tradition. At fault were not the British – who were only marginally interested in South Asian music – but a growing sense of a Hindu classical past, a Hindu Golden Age of Spirituality, leading to negative valuation of Muslim contributions to music during the long period of Mogul patronage and support for the performing arts.

This revitalization took place through efforts to classicize, in Chatterjee's sense of the term, for example by founding schools, inventing systems of notation (a topic of great controversy), crafting modern music scholarship and historiography (based on the study of Sanskrit treatises, intended to establish norms for performance), organizing music conferences, and instituting the public concert. The classicization of music was one of a number of movements aimed at fostering Indian culture, both national and regional, by a new, self-aware, British-educated middle class.



College students in Chiangmai, northern Thailand, practice music from the Bangkok-derived classical tradition, 1992.

In Indonesia, as in India, music had a key place in the visions of nationalists, from the very beginnings of the movement towards independence in the early years of the twentieth century. However, in contrast to the solid embrace of classicized musical traditions by the Indian nationalist movement and middle class, court-associated forms of performance from the region that came to be Indonesia have been subjects of heated debate. Despite the profound musical diversity of the region, central Javanese music alone has been the subject of most intense classicization, as well as that of controversy regarding its place in twentieth century national culture. Java's centrality in conceptions of a national classical music is, of course, a microcosm of a much larger issue: the status of Javanese and other regional cultures within the nation. While Indian court music was to pass from the old ruling class to a new, urban middle class – with relatively little tinkering by the British – in Indonesia the transfer in question was from Java to the whole, new nation, with the Javanese elite at least attempting to hold on to its position as gatekeeper of the arts by opening schools and training academies for the arts. The strong interest of colonial scholars in documenting and promoting certain forms of music in the Dutch East Indies has played a role in the image of central Javanese gamelan after independence, as have attitudes towards the elite Javanese of the colonial period. Post-independence, the traditional performing arts have continued to be a focal point for top-down efforts at cultural engineering, from the extension of Java-focused arts curricula in the conservatories to New Order attempts to upgrade and normalize performance standards.

High culture and the bureaucracy

There is no doubt that the court tradition of music in Thailand has been classicized in the ways developed in Indonesia, through the establishment of training academies with centralized curricula, written musical notation, scientific analysis, and the development of prestigious, Sanskrit-based vocabulary separating classical music from other forms. But while the path to such status leads us to many of the same issues we have seen in India and Indonesia, it diverges in intriguing ways due to Thailand's atypical experience with nationalism in the Asian context. While Siam was not for-

mally colonized by a European power, it has nonetheless been intensely concerned with the construction of national identity and the extension of hegemony through a centralized culture. Yet, in striking contrast to our earlier examples, traditional court music was not initially embraced as an emblem of modern nationalism. It was, in fact, studiously set aside in favour of highly westernized musical forms until the last decades of the twentieth century, when it caught the attention of a nostalgic, identity-seeking urban middle class.

During the period when the Indian and Indonesian independence movements struggled over the place of court arts in modern society, Thailand wrestled not with tension between colonizer and colonized but between the monarchy and an increasingly powerful bureaucracy, culminating in the 1932 change to constitutional monarchy. In the era of cultural revolution under Phibun Songkhraam's first government, 1938-1944, westernized musical forms were favoured and court music came under bureaucratic control. Since that time, the former court arts have retained strong associations with monarchy and past-oriented constructions of identity, which postulate a sort of High Culture of Old Siam. Today, this music figures prominently in government-generated presentations of culture such as official publications, websites, and tourist shows. It is supported by the national educational system, and since the 1970s and 1980s has been valued highly by the large and increasingly diasporic middle class.

What accounts for the similarities amongst our three cases? To note that the three share certain features, and that India was the earliest – and most representative – example in terms of the complete embrace of classicized music by the nationalist movement, is not to suggest that the phenomena spread from India across Southeast Asia, as earlier historical interpretations stated. Asian countries did not exist in geo-historical vacuums during the colonial period, and the various nationalist movements of the region were aware of and to some degree inspired by one another, but a better answer probably lies in the globalization of the late nineteenth century, which was, paradoxically, operating at the same time as the localizing visions of nationalism. Western-derived transnational trends such as capitalism, colonialism, ideological constructs (such as the idea of progress), and technological inventions (like photography) contributed to unifying a global cultural elite (Peleggi 2002). It is likely that the set of ideas and institutional changes we are calling classicization were part of this global flow, including the ironic mixing of western-derived phenomena with constructions of a classical Indic past, in India, Indonesia, and Thailand.

In a longer version of this work, I also consider factors, which might account for some of the differences in our three cases. Key amongst these are the nature and timing of the appearance of a sizeable urban middle class (early in India, much later in Thailand and Indonesia), and the position of colonial power-holders and/or old elites *vis-à-vis* emerging nationalism and twentieth-century national culture. <

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Dr Pamela Moro (Pamela Myers-Moro) is associate professor of Anthropology at Willamette University, Salem, Oregon, USA. She received a PhD from University of California, Berkeley in 1988, and authored *Thai Music and Musicians in Contemporary Bangkok*. Moro has conducted fieldwork on music in Bangkok and Chiangmai and the spent September-December 2002 as an affiliated fellow at the IIAS.
pmoro@willamette.edu