

Preserving Folk Music in Community Cultural Events as a Method of Preserving Traditional Heritage: A Case Study of the Ta Oi Ethnic Group in Thua Thien-Hue Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

The Ta Oi people in Thua Thien-Hue province continue to preserve and promote numerous unique indigenous music genres. However, these invaluable cultural heritages are at risk of vanishing from their cultural life in the future if there is no comprehensive and scientifically backed protection policy in place. My first-hand fieldwork and surveys have demonstrated that folk music is integral to the Ta Oi people's way of life, being practiced at every stage of their lives, in significant cultural events within the community, and during religious rituals. Music serves as a distinct language, fostering connections among individuals, between people, and between people and spirits within specific cultural spaces, thereby forming a remarkably distinctive cultural mosaic among the Ta Oi people. Utilizing qualitative research methods, this study focuses on conducting in-depth interviews with skilled local artisans and participating in folk music performances within the Ta Oi community. The findings of the study reveal that significant community events play a crucial role in the practice, preservation, and maintenance of the Ta Oi people's traditional musical culture. The study asserts that preserving folk music within the cultural life of the community serves as the most effective approach to safeguarding the indigenous folk art of each distinct community. This progression would enable the maintenance of the musical heritage of each ethnic group within contemporary society. Such endeavors necessitate support from the government, researchers, and local authorities.

Keywords: folk music heritage; folk music in indigenous cultural festivals; folk music in life cycle events; Ta Oi people; Thua Thien-Hue, Vietnam

Introduction

The Ta Oi people, with a population of 34,960 individuals, are an ethnic group who have long resided in the Truong Son area and its surroundings, specifically the South-Central region. They are predominantly concentrated in A Luoi district (Thua Thien-Hue), Dak Krong, and Huong Hoa district (Quang Tri). The Ta Oi people also have other branches and names such as Pa Co, Ta Uot, Kan Tua, and Pa Hy, and their languages belong to the Mon-Khmer group within the Austroasiatic language family.

In A Luoi district (Thua Thien-Hue), the Ta Oi people constitute a significant population of 26,000 individuals, accounting for approximately 66% of the district's total population of 36,880 people (Nguyen, 2009: 14-21). They are considered the primary ethnic group in this district. The main occupation of the Ta Oi people is hillside and mountain rice cultivation, along with other food crop cultivation. Additionally, they engage in fishing, hunting wild animals, and maintain the tradition of Zèng weaving (Tran & Nguyen, 2003). The Ta Oi people continue to preserve numerous forms of traditional culture until now.



Figure 1. A dance and singing performance at the Rong house

The house holds significant cultural symbolism for the Ta Oi people, serving as an essential cultural space for organising various cultural events, where folk music plays an integral role. The traditional Ta Oi house is designed as a long stilt house, often accompanied by a Rong house, which serves as a communal cultural space. The house has an oval shape with two sloping roofs, featuring two main doors at both ends of the stairs and two middle doors. Typically, traditional houses consist of five compartments without walls, each measuring approximately 1.6 meters in length. The main door, windows, and roof sides of the house are adorned with platforms and courtyards. It is customary to attach two buffalo horns or two dragon heads to the gables of the communal house.

Like many other ethnic groups in Vietnam, wedding customs hold significant importance in the Ta Oi people's life cycle rituals. Weddings serve as crucial events where folk music is created, practiced, preserved, and passed down through generations. The marriage process among the Ta Oi people involves three main steps: (i) the meeting of the bride and groom's families; (ii) the engagement ceremony; and (iii) the official wedding ceremony. The most formal and solemn ritual is the wedding covenant, which includes offerings such as silver, precious stones, onyx, ear jewelry, necklaces, bracelets, and food items sourced from four-legged animals like pigs, cows, deer, and dogs. Following the covenant ceremony is the engagement ceremony, during which the two families discuss the specifics of the wedding date. The third and final step is the wedding ceremony itself, which involves various rituals, including the welcoming of the bride, the demographic cutting ceremony (where the bride's name is removed from her family's list and added to the husband's family list), and a thanksgiving ceremony to the deities for bringing the couple together through fate.

In the realm of sacred culture, the Ta Oi people annually organise numerous festivals to express gratitude to heaven, earth, Jang (an important deity of the village and mountains for the Ta Oi people), and other sacred gods (Jang). These festivals serve as significant spaces and occasions for the creation and development of various folk music genres. Among the festivals, the most essential and grandest ones of the year are the season offerings (super aya). It is a ritual to express gratitude to the gods for a year of abundant crops and prosperous businesses. The offerings for this ceremony include not only buffaloes, cows, chickens, fish, and other livestock, but also a variety of plants that have been utilized by the people throughout the year. During the ceremony, a buffalo stabbing ritual takes place, accompanied by lively and enjoyable forms of entertainment.

In the spiritual and cultural life of the Ta Oi people, funerals hold great significance as one of the important religious rituals and the final rite in the people's life cycle. Funeral folk songs are practiced and flourish during these ceremonies and events. Funerals among the Ta Oi people involve two main stages: the funeral ceremony and the grave removal and abandonment ceremony. The coffin used for the deceased is a significant cultural artifact that warrants observation and study. Ta Oi coffins are crafted from solid wood, with the interior of the chosen tree hollowed out to form the coffin. Once the coffin is completed, a ceremony is conducted to place the deceased inside it before proceeding with the burial. The Ta Oi people do not allow the deceased's body to remain in the family home for an extended period.

Therefore, the tangible and intangible cultural heritages, including rituals and beliefs, of the Ta Oi people not only serve as cultural symbols but also provide important cultural spaces for the practice of performing arts, particularly folk music. Folk music is an indispensable element within these cultural events. Its appearance varies depending on the different spaces and performance contexts, displaying a rich and distinctive character. Thus, it becomes crucial to explore the core elements of Ta Oi folk music, its presence in community cultural events, perspectives on the importance of folk music heritage in social life, and approaches to preserving the folk music heritage within the Ta Oi community.

To discover and clarify the characteristics of the folk music heritage of the Ta Oi people in their cultural life and traditional festivals, I will utilize the stakeholder theory introduced by R. Edward Freeman (1984). The theory of stakeholders, originally analysed in administration and business, has now been applied by several scholars in cultural heritage conservation. For instance, Aas, Ladkin, and Fletcher (2005) explored a collaborative approach in the relationship between heritage management and tourism development in Luang Prabang, Laos. They aimed to examine the cooperation and management roles of stakeholders, as well as the interdependence of heritage conservation and tourism development. Another study by Simengwa and Makuva (2015) discussed the legal frameworks for heritage in Malawi. The authors argued that conflicts often arise from managing heritage sites with the interests of multiple parties, emphasizing the need for stakeholder theory to guide management practices and address these conflicts. Similarly, Tosun (2000)'s research, and Huibin and Azizan Marzuki's study (2012) reviewed previous studies on community participation in tourism and innovation systems, analysing the specific characteristics and current situation of cultural heritage tourism in Penang, Malaysia. Chirikure and Pwiti (2008) and Fouad and Messallam's (2018) research focused on the role of community participation in heritage conservation and promotion. These studies provide insights into the importance of involving communities in preserving and promoting heritage values.

The theoretical framework investigates the key stakeholders, including (i) management agencies; (ii) local communities as heritage creators; (iii) researchers; and (iv) media agencies. The folk music heritage and traditional cultural events of the Ta Oi people will be at the centre of this analysis, and the relevant agencies will have an impactful and supportive relationship with each other to preserve and develop the heritage of this tribe.

Literature review

According to the International Council of Folk Music, folk music is "the product of a musical tradition that has been developed through oral transmission" (Pegg, 2001). Thus, folk music should be viewed as a product of traditions transmitted orally. Every folk music tradition has outstanding artists within the community who contribute to the creation, practice, and preservation of the music across generations.

Shepherd and Wicke (1997) along with others, have tackled the challenge of comprehending music as a form of human expression. They argue that music is the foundation of social life. It serves a role beyond mere relaxation or entertainment – it is central to the formation and reproduction of human society. Music, especially folk music, participates in almost all human activities, and in human cultural life by its special function and power. Merriam (1964: 219-227) has found common functions, which in my opinion are relatively universal and suitable for most cultural and social contexts of people, including: (i) emotional expression; (ii) aesthetic enjoyment; (iii) entertainment; (iv) communication; (v) symbolic representations; (vi) physical response; (vii) enforcing compliance to social norms; (viii)

validation of social institutions and religious rituals; (ix) contribution to the continuity and stability of culture; and (x) contribution to the integration of society.

Music deeply reflects ethnic cultural identity through aesthetics that have been created and maintained in the community for generations. Folk music serves to protect the identity of each community and has connections to social movements and racial identities (Roy, 2002). American folk music has played a role in both overturning and solidifying the racial divisions between blacks and whites in twentieth-century America. The concept of aesthetic identity refers to the cultural association of art genres with social groups, wherein these groups feel that the genres represent their own art, music, and literature. According to Roy, before being labeled as folk music, Native American music exhibited more racial integration compared to the society surrounding it, drawing influences from both European and African sources.

Furthermore, folk music has been recognized as a tool of racial solidarity during times of racial polarization, particularly by American communists and their allies (Roy, 2002). According to To (1981), a prominent expert in ethnomusicology in Vietnam, folk music has not only been influenced by changes in feudal dynasties but has also experienced interruptions and loss of historical continuity. The historical continuity of folk music contributes to the creation of a national musical tradition that withstands cultural assimilation attempts by invading forces. Folk music serves as a repository for preserving ancient traditions and plays a crucial role in the cultural adjustment and support of national musical culture (Nguyen, 1980). Therefore, folk music holds a significant position within a culture, and according to To (2007), it serves a unique function in the social life of each ethnic group, which cannot be replaced by other types of music or modern musical forms.

Preserving the heritage of folk music in contemporary social life poses an important challenge for researchers and managers in this field. Wang (2014) proposes the concept of “preserving heritage by exploiting it”, which aligns with the law of development and the spirit of adapting to the times. This approach aims to find radical solutions in the protection and development of traditional music heritage and traditional culture rather than preserving it solely as a “museum type”. Instead, the focus is on establishing measures such as museums that actively preserve and promote the cultural heritage of traditional music.

In relation to the preservation of folk music heritage, Gillan (2004) discusses the role of village festivals in safeguarding the local ritual repertoire. Chapter six of Gillan’s work delves into the analysis of a song called “Tubarama”, which holds relevance to conservation issues. These village festivals serve as a platform for the expression, continuation, and preservation of indigenous folk music from one generation to another. Regarding the preservation and promotion of music during festivals and cultural events, Burns (2008) argues that the popularity of British folk music since the early 1970s can be attributed to its performance as music. British folk rock, with its connections to cultural and music industry marketing and promotion techniques, along with its inclusion in world music festivals during the 1990s, has contributed to its increased audience appeal since the mid-1990s. The challenge of preserving folk music is closely linked to educational activities. Lykes et al. (2018) suggests that the transmission of folk music and dance should rely on traditional methods, such as oral tradition passed down from one generation to the next. This approach allows future generations to gain a more profound understanding of their country’s history and culture, enabling them to embrace their own identity, draw from the past, and strive for a brighter future. Nguyen (2014) emphasizes that the traditional characteristics of music primarily reside in folk music, encompassing musical instrument performance, folk singing, and various artistic expressions. Additionally, improvisation is highlighted as an important value in traditional performing arts, as it adds to the unique charm of traditional music. Similarly, in India, improvisation in the creation and performance of traditional music is considered a defining characteristic, enhancing the distinctiveness and allure of this musical form (Suppiah & Khan, 1993).

In folk art, the artist plays a central role. Dave (2009) emphasizes the need to elevate the level and awareness of folk artists and overall artists to defend folk music and folk art. He also highlights that street plays today serve the purpose of awakening citizens to their rights. However, this folk legacy is at risk of extinction as young people are increasingly drawn to Western culture and art. Thus, there is an urgent need to preserve the endangered Kathiawari art and literary forms.

And preserving cultural heritage in general, and folk music art in particular, requires the special support of stakeholders (Doan, 2021). The preservation and promotion of folk music from an ethnic

group can only be achieved with the support of management agencies, local communities (as heritage creators), researchers, and the media.

Vietnam, with its rich cultural tradition spanning thousands of years, has managed to maintain and preserve its own identity in traditional music, particularly among ethnic groups. Despite facing challenges from foreign musical cultures, Vietnamese traditional music finds the strength to protect itself and engage in self-creation to reach higher levels (Vietnam Academy of Music, 2003). To (2007) emphasizes that folk music, rooted in the old agrarian economy, exists and flourishes within communities and societies. It is closely tied to the daily activities, production, and life of farmers, reflecting their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Folk music is often performed and received simultaneously, created by artists without prior preparation or composition. Importantly, folk art often takes the form of a collective possession within the community.

Witnessing the passion of elderly artisans in preserving folk music has further motivated the researcher to contribute to the preservation of this endangered heritage. The future of Ta Oi folk music in the community relies on its practice by the next generation. Throughout this experience, important factors in the conservation process have been identified, which will be explored in the following sections.

Methodology

This study will adopt an interdisciplinary approach encompassing cultural anthropology, musicology, and ethnomusicology. The focus of the article is to identify the role and significance of folk music in the cultural life of the Ta Oi people, particularly in cultural events. Additionally, the study aims to determine strategies for preserving and safeguarding this musical heritage for future generations of the Ta Oi community. Consequently, the study will not primarily focus on musicological analysis.

I conducted the fieldwork in specific communes such as Nham, A Ngo, Huong Lam, and Hong Trung, which are areas with a concentrated population of Ta Oi people and rich cultural and folk music traditions. The research involved in-depth interviews with 25 elderly artisans, labeled as Artisan 1 to Artisan 25, three village elders, three village heads (Village Heads 1 to Village Heads 3), two civil servants responsible for cultural management (Staff 1 and Staff 2), and two experts specializing in Ta Oi ethnic culture (Expert 1 and Expert 2). The selection criteria for the in-depth interviews focused on talented folk singers and musical instrument performers who possess extensive experience, a deep understanding of local culture, and are advanced in age. Additionally, interviews were conducted with village elders, village heads, and other folk artists to gain further insights into migration patterns, community living, and general cultural characteristics of the Ta Oi people in the region. These interviews provide valuable information regarding the importance of folk music in the cultural life of the Ta Oi people and shed light on their creation, practice, and preservation of various forms of folk music. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with participants and artists during festivals and folk music activities of the Ta Oi people in the local area. These interviews offer a closer observation of the relationship between music and the cultural and religious life of the community.

The study employs an ethnomusicological approach to identify the musical characteristics of the Ta Oi people, exploring the distinctive folk songs and musical instrument families that are interrelated. The research delves into understanding how these elements are interconnected within different performance spaces and environments specific to the Ta Oi people. The field research conducted in the locality, combined with analysis, synthesis, comparison, and contrast methods, allows for a comprehensive understanding of various aspects of music in the cultural and religious life of the Ta Oi people.

Results

Folk songs in life-cycle events

Folk songs play a significant role in the major events of the Ta Oi people's lives, from birth to death. Depending on the specific life events, folk songs serve different functions and hold influence in shaping and preserving the Ta Oi cultural identity.

Lullabies, known as *Nui y col*, are a genre of folk songs associated with the early stages of life. Ta Oi parents often sing lullabies while carrying their children on their backs during work in the fields or to lull them to sleep at home. Lullabies serve not only as a means of soothing children to sleep but also have an educational function. They serve as the initial music lessons for Ta Oi children. Additionally, lullabies contribute to the artistic development and formation of Ta Oi folk music in the community. Expert 2 further elaborates:

The folk music of the Ta Oi people demonstrates distinctive characteristics that are evident across various genres, ranging from lullabies to love songs. These shared traits include the melodic structure and the timbre, creating a sense of cohesion and unity throughout their folk music repertoire. Therefore, it can be stated that folk songs, including lullabies, serve as the foundation for shaping the overall folk music of the Ta Oi people.

The lullabies of the Ta Oi people hold significant value as a cultural heritage that the community strives to preserve and pass down to future generations. These lullabies are not merely songs with soothing melodies, but they also encompass profound lyrical content that reflects the philosophy of life, folklore beliefs, and traditional values held by the Ta Oi people. In the lyrics of Ta Oi lullabies, one can find expressions of a mother's love, moral values, aesthetic sensibilities, and the importance of upholding customs such as good parenting, harmonious neighborly relations, and communal solidarity in the face of life's trials and tribulations. These are the important contributions of music that have also been pointed out by Merriam (1964) in the basic functions of music, here the emotional expression function, enforcing conformity to social norms, and contribution to the continuity and stability of culture, in human society. Those standards, still practiced and maintained by the Ta Oi mothers in their cultural life, are still practiced today.

For example, one of the recorded lullabies from artisan 18 contains the following content:
“Put your baby to sleep well, baby, sleep well, baby / Go to the forest, up the mountain, pick fruits and vegetables, burn bees / Oh my baby... oh... when I grow up, I'll study well so that I can have a good future for society in the future / When I grow up, I will weave a warm and happy future.”

Lullabies continue to be utilized in the Ta Oi community to soothe children to sleep. However, there is a pressing concern that these lullabies might fade away from the cultural fabric of the community if appropriate and timely conservation methods are not implemented. Staff 1 highlights:

Lullabies are still preserved within the Ta Oi community by mothers and grandmothers, who have taken on the responsibility of passing them down to younger generations within their families. However, there is a growing trend among young people to prefer singing modern and soothing songs to their children. This preference stems from their desire to express their contemporary vitality through modern songs from other nations or imported from abroad. As a result, there is a risk that the traditional lullabies of the Ta Oi people might gradually be overshadowed by these modern influences.

This is an issue that needs to be discussed in depth.

In my opinion, based on many years of research and fieldwork, lullabies and many other folk songs are found in almost all ethnic groups in Vietnam. They have been created and maintained by the locals for centuries. These genres of folk songs express their unique identity and have a stable structure. The musical melody remains fixed, while people add lyrical content to adapt it to different contexts. For example, the same tune may be used to sing a baby lullaby, but the lyrical content will vary when a mother sings in the field compared to singing to the baby in the house. Similarly, when a love song is sung at a wedding, the lyrical content will differ from when it is sung at a community festival, even though both are performed on the same musical structure.

The creative feature of the folk music of the Ta Oi people, as well as other ethnic groups in Vietnam, lies in improvisation on the spot, rather than pre-composing like professional musicians do. Improvising on the spot means that people will spontaneously incorporate lyrical content into an existing musical melody, regardless of the time or place, without prior preparation. Therefore, the folk songs of the ethnic groups in Vietnam, up to the present time, possess a unique identity. Each ethnic group has created these songs with the desire to maintain and preserve them for future generations.

Stakeholders, especially researchers, play a crucial role in providing information to management agencies and media outlets to support the community in raising awareness about the cultural and musical value of their heritage. However, whether the heritage is preserved and maintained ultimately depends on the community - the very subject that creates the heritage. Therefore, stakeholders need to interact and participate together in the process of preserving the heritage of lullabies particularly, and indigenous folk music, in general, within their ethnic groups. In the discussion, one of the important issues that will be explored in depth is the decline of traditional folk songs following the lullaby genre. Folk songs, which are associated with folk games and intended for children between the ages of 10 to 14, are gradually disappearing from the cultural practices of the Ta Oi community. Most local artisans and cultural managers acknowledge that this genre now exists only in the memories of the elderly, as the younger generation no longer sings and engages in traditional folk games accompanied by these songs.

Based on surveys and retrospective interviews with specific artists, it is evident that folk songs not only enhance the appeal of folk games, but also play a crucial role in fostering the creative abilities of young individuals. They contribute to the development of new and diverse folk games, while enriching the folklore of the Ta Oi people. Folk songs also serve as a means of instilling values of kindness and honesty among young individuals, nurturing the Ta Oi community. Expert 1 adds:

How to restore music for this age group is an important issue because historically, this genre of music has had a great effect on the formation of personality, intelligence, courage, and love for people – as children create and practice this kind of music together. However, folk games are now in danger of disappearing, being replaced by electronic games that appeal to young people. The state's task is to revive, preserve, and maintain the best young folk music genres, introduce them into community life, and teach them in primary and secondary school departments.

Thus, the responsibility for preserving and maintaining folk games lies with policymakers, researchers, local authorities, and other relevant parties. This study will be further discussed in the next section.

The folk music of the Ta Oi is closely associated with various adult events, including love and response songs. The distinctive melodies of the *Ar boch* and *Co Loi* genres form the essence of Ta Oi folk music. The *Ar boch* can be sung in the form of a collective response, or sometimes as a reciprocal song between two individuals. When sung alone, this song serves as a medium for Ta Oi people to express their emotions, sorrows, and joys of life and human existence. According to Artisans 1, 2, and 6, they explained:

During family gatherings, the Ta Oi people engage in personal singing, expressing their individual joy. There are also moments when they sing alone, particularly when they face sadness and unhappiness in life. Singing alone becomes a means for them to share their pain and sorrow stemming from the loss of something significant. Furthermore, they incorporate verses into their songs as supplications to the gods, seeking assistance in their daily lives and wishing for good fortune and happiness.

The Ta Oi community actively promotes *Ar boch* songs during village cultural events and youth artistic activities. *Ar boch* can be performed in various forms. Young men and women utilize *Ar boch* as a medium for expressing love, showcasing their talents, and sharing emotions with one another, regardless of gender. They sing together to foster connections, introduce each other during weddings, and participate in village festivals. Artisan 13 emphasizes:

During village weddings, friends of the bride and groom are invited to participate. These friends engage in singing love songs to one another, showcasing their talents, and sharing their thoughts. Remarkably, there have been instances where couples have formed and eventually married as a result of these wedding events and the profound connections established through these unique love songs.

Love singing at community cultural events, particularly at weddings, plays a significant role in fostering social morality, nurturing cultural development, and preserving indigenous traditions, including folk art, folk songs, and languages. The lyrics of the song performed by artist 19 encompass the following content:

My friend, you work hard, you should rest under the shade of the trees in the forest. Drink a lot of clear spring water in the forest. You eat many sweet ripe fruits in the forest. Don't let your parents worry. You are strong enough to make rice, earn money to support your parents and marry a girl. Friend, did you hear me say...

Norton (2010), in his study on the folk music of Prespa Alpany weddings, observed that musical performances played a crucial role in establishing social and moral order, while also naturalizing the differences between women and men. Traditional performance settings and the inspiration derived from the love experiences of young individuals contribute to the creation of reciprocal love songs that hold significant cultural and linguistic value, representing the ethnic group's identity. This process also shapes the ethnic poetic identity. Notably, poetry and music share an inseparable connection, with the creation of folk melodies heavily reliant on elements of traditional folk poetry. In line with this, Proschan (2010: 613), in his study on love songs among the Khmu and the Vietnamese, emphasizes that, typically, the individual who demonstrates the greatest inspiration is the one who skillfully combines a significant number of verses. They arrange these verses in a harmonious manner, employing a plethora of rhymes, utilizing diverse word groups, incorporating vivid imagery, and employing contrasting or complementary elements.

Ar boch, along with other forms of love and response folk songs, play a crucial role in the development of ethnic languages and folklore, not only among the Ta Oi people but also in many other ethnic communities in Vietnam. Field investigations conducted among the artisans reveal that, fortunately, the Ta Oi people in A Luoi district continue to uphold the tradition of *Ar boch* singing in their community life. During village festivals and various cultural and recreational activities, people still engage in reciprocal singing, which fosters and strengthens love relationships.

In addition to songs that serve entertainment and educational purposes, there are also folk songs that serve ritual functions, following the *Co Loi* melody. These songs hold significant importance in festivals and religious ceremonies of the Ta Oi people, particularly during the harvest festival when the community has completed their harvest. The *Co Loi* songs act as a vital connection between the Ta Oi people and their Jang gods, symbolizing their spiritual bond. Artisans 1, 2, 18, 21, and 23 express their insights on this matter:

People sing *Co Loi* songs as expressions of gratitude to Jang for bestowing a prosperous harvest and favorable business outcomes. These songs are a means for the Ta Oi people to seek the gods' assistance in maintaining a balanced climate – neither excessive rain nor excessive sun – and to safeguard their rice crops from diseases. By offering these prayers through the medium of *Co Loi* songs, the Ta Oi people aspire to ensure an abundance of food during harvest time and to prevent any hardships or poverty. *Co Loi* songs hold a significant role as the Ta Oi people's heartfelt prayers to our gods, Jang.

The singing of *Co Loi* songs holds particular significance when performed by the elderly members of the village, as they convey important messages about traditional values to future generations. Woma (2012) highlights that music, including funeral music, is a collection of activities that support cultural norms and symbolically represent them through public performances facilitated by cultural practitioners. This ensures the acceptance and reinforcement of the fundamental characteristics of the community. Funeral music, in particular, carries a highly political nature, as those who engage in its practice address social issues. Thus, politics and the social context play a governing role in funeral music, while funeral music itself holds a significant place within society.

Furthermore, within a religious setting, *Co Loi* songs are also sung during house inaugurations as a means of praying to Jang and other gods for the owner's wellbeing, happiness, and prosperity. Typically, the singing of *Co Loi* songs is accompanied by the beat of a drum and the resonance of a gong. Artisan 21 expresses insight on this matter:

After the completion of building a house, it is customary for my family to invite both family members and neighbors to join in the celebration and share the joy. During this gathering, our family and neighbors come together to sing songs of happiness and to offer prayers to the gods for our family's continuous happiness and financial prosperity. Through our songs, we express our wishes for our children to grow up quickly and for our family and neighbors to experience everlasting happiness and joy.

Thus, in the important events of the Ta Oi people, from festivals to weddings, funerals, or building a new house, folk music is always present with an important position and role. Therefore, preserving the musical heritage in community events is of utmost importance. The decisive factor in the conservation process must be the community, followed by the stakeholders. The relationship among stakeholders will help maintain the heritage in the social life of each ethnic group.

Lastly, folk songs play a particularly significant role in a crucial event in the lives of the Ta Oi people, the funeral. When a Ta Oi individual passes away and returns to their ancestors, folk songs serve the important function of guiding and accompanying them on this journey. The Ta Oi people have a custom of singing and crying when paying respects to the deceased. Mourning songs, known as *Raroi*, provide a means for the living Ta Oi community to express the pain of losing a family member or a beloved neighbor, reminiscing about the shared moments they had together. These songs also serve as a means of connecting the living with the departed. Artisan 7 provides insights into this aspect of Ta Oi culture:

We hold a strong belief that through these songs, the departed can hear their words. We believe the spirits of the deceased will provide us with strength and support, enabling us to attain prosperity for our families and the village. Singing these songs serves as a way to bid farewell to the departed and express the hope that the spirits will continue to assist us and guide us throughout our lives.

Indeed, every cultural tradition holds its unique philosophies surrounding death, as well as distinct cultural habits and customs for honoring the deceased based on the rites of their community. Previous research has demonstrated that modern funeral rites are interconnected with the concept of “living religion”, which explores how religious beliefs and practices are integrated into daily life, both within and beyond institutionalized settings. The connection between the living and the deceased is not severed but continues through these rites. Funeral music, which often references themes of heaven and angels, can be seen as an integral element of the funeral ritual (Bruin-M., 2019).



Figure 2. A Ta Oi sings at a cultural event of his ethnic group

In addition, the Ta Oi people also sing *Cha Chap* folk songs. The village elders have also adopted *Cha Chap* songs to impart emotions and traditional morality to the younger generation of the Ta Oi community. During village events, ranging from weddings to village festivals, the Ta Oi people continue to sing *Cha Chap* songs, expressing their thoughts and feelings towards one another and their deities. It is worth noting that there are ongoing debates regarding the copyright of the *Cha Chap* genre between the Ta Oi and Pa Ko people. Local surveys and studies indicate that both ethnic groups acknowledge that the genre was created by their ancestors. However, it is highly likely that the Ta Oi people “borrowed” this song from the Pa Ko people, preserving it since ancient times and considering it of utmost importance in their cultural life. The phenomenon of acculturation or borrowing in folk art

is a common occurrence that I have observed during my field trips studying folk music for nearly 20 years. To determine the copyright of this folk song, I planned to conduct a follow-up study to delve into the issues related to the acculturation of ethnic minorities in this area.

The folk songs of the Ta Oi people have been integral to the cultural and social events of the Ta Oi community up to the present day. The elders within the community wish for these folk songs to be preserved for future generations because they possess not only pleasing melodies that align with the community's culture, but also because they were created by their ancestors. Moreover, the content of these folk songs holds significant value in terms of moral education and cultural traditions for the Ta Oi people's future generations.

It should be emphasized that the folk songs of each ethnic group in Vietnam are the products of collective creation, collective practice, and maintenance from generation to generation. The melodies of the Ta Oi people's folk songs, from lullabies to ritual songs, have all been created and maintained by the Ta Oi community; it is not created by an individual, so personal factors, especially the creative involvement of professional artists, can be the risk that their folk songs will be stretched and distant from the world their traditional identity. Therefore, I strongly feel that we need to respect the community's own aesthetic and identity in creating, practicing, and maintaining the folk music of each specific ethnic group. Preserving folk tunes does not mean being conservative in maintaining and promoting our cultural identity, but in essence, we seek to find our identity and develop distinct characteristics in the music and culture of each community in Vietnam and the music culture of ethnic communities as well. This is also the view of To (2007), one of the member of the Standing Committee of the International Council of Traditional Music ICTM-UNESCO, a leading expert on ethnography in Vietnam.

It should be noted that, with the 53 other ethnic groups in present-day Vietnam, the folk music of the Ta Oi people showcases their unique identity through a relatively fixed melodic structure. These musical melodies are created collectively by the Ta Oi community, rather than by individuals. The copyright for these tunes belongs to the community. Those who engage in folk song performances creatively incorporate different lyrical content into these fixed melodies, resulting in a richness and allure of the folk songs. While personal factors play a significant role in professional music composition, the creation of Ta Oi folk music emphasizes the importance of community elements and community creativity.

Discussion

Folk music is an important heritage for every nation or ethnic group (Folkestad, 2002; Merriam, 1964; Pegg, 2001; Revill, 2004; Shepherd & Wicke, 1997; To, 2007; Woma, 2012). For the Ta Oi people, and for the diversity of Vietnamese culture in general, folk music continues to be maintained in the community's cultural events. However, this heritage is at risk of disappearing and not being passed down to future generations. The elderly Ta Oi people, who are in their 70s, 80s, and 90s and have been involved in creating, preserving, and promoting the folk music of this ethnic group, are eager to preserve and maintain this precious legacy for their future generations. Artisan 12 expressed concerns about the increasing popularity of songs from other cultures among young Ta Oi people:

The content of these songs does not align with the traditional culture of the Ta Oi people. As older individuals, we may find these songs inappropriate, but we still consider our traditional folk songs significant because they convey educational content that aligns with our cultural traditions. We are uncertain whether future generations will continue to sing the songs that our ancestors created.

In my opinion, the younger generation is entitled to perform modern songs imported from the West or other cultures into the Ta Oi community. However, management agencies, researchers, and media need to raise awareness to help local communities gain a more profound understanding of the issue of national identity created by their ancestors. Preserving the cultural identity of their ancestors is not conservative, but rather a means to maintain good customs and cultural traditions for future generations of the Ta Oi people.

Based on over 50 years of experience in fieldwork and collecting Vietnamese folk music, To (2007) believes that the creators of folk art hold the key to successful preservation of traditional and folk

products. Only creative individuals and communities can effectively maintain and preserve their art. I concur with To (2007)'s perspective. Drawing from nearly 20 years of experience in fieldwork and research on folk music in Vietnam, I believe that we should preserve folk music within the community and restore the right to preserve and maintain this heritage to the community. However, we should professionalize this form of conservation.

We should establish folk performing arts clubs in the villages of the Ta Oi people, as well as in other ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. Why? The reasons are quite simple: (i) folk art carries historical significance derived from the cultural, economic, and contextual living characteristics of the past. Previously, folk art creators composed folk songs and instrumental music on the spot, drawing inspiration from cultural events within their community. For example, wedding songs were composed to express promises about the future and the joyful emotions between the bride and groom. Funeral dirges conveyed mourning for the deceased when paying respects at funerals. All song content was created spontaneously without prior preparation, unlike today's professional music. Therefore, the lyric content and methods of folk songs are rich and representative of the Ta Oi ethnic identity. While the younger generation today can only re-perform the folk songs and traditional tunes of their ancestors by learning from the older artisans in the village, they no longer engage in direct creation as before. They are now practitioners and performers, rather than creators; (ii) present-day young people often have to seek employment in industrial companies to support their families. In other words, their economic activities differ from those of previous generations, making it challenging to find time for artistic creation and practice. Artisan 14 commented:

I am very passionate about the folk music and dance of my people, but I have to work in the economy to support my family. My children need money to attend school, and I also require money to sustain our livelihood. We can only find time to practice together during the festivals in our village. Sadly, many of the folk songs taught to me by my parents are fading from my memory.

Therefore, we need to establish a policy that supports the creation of clubs. In this framework, the state and local authorities should allocate salaries and funds to these clubs to ensure their development and creativity. Club members would be akin to professional artists, with their primary responsibility being the continuous creation, learning, and preservation of the folk performing arts passed down by their ancestors. During cultural events, they would serve as performers, introducing and guiding the younger generations in the preservation and practice of their traditional folk music; and (iii) professionalizing folk music through clubs would facilitate the government and the central cultural sector in managing and preserving the musical identity of each ethnic group. Researchers and cultural managers at both the central and local levels would have easy access to these clubs, enabling them to provide guidance and direction on the best methods to preserve the folk music heritage of each ethnic group. This approach also ensures the preservation of folk music for each ethnic group in Vietnam, avoiding the risk of hybridization and the dilution of each group's distinct identity. In addition to the community's ecological environment, music education in high schools plays a crucial role. Čalić and Durdanović (2020) emphasize the importance of nurturing traditional folk music within families, as it can enhance students' motivation to learn content related to traditional folk music. Students recognize that listening to folk music within the family is an underutilized resource.

The preservation of folk art, in general, and the folk music of the Ta Oi people, in particular, should prioritize the role of artisans. Artisans play a vital role in preserving folk music, as they possess talent in creating and transmitting their culture to future generations of the Ta Oi people. Extensive field research has confirmed that artisans are crucial in maintaining ethnic identity and passing on this legacy (To, 2007). To ensure the preservation and development of folk music, it is important to provide adequate support to artisans, particularly the elderly and experienced ones within ethnic groups. Vietnam currently has policies in place to honor artisans, but there is a lack of financial support, especially in economically disadvantaged and remote areas.

Finally, the preservation of folk music heritage requires the role of stakeholders, including researchers, management agencies, local communities, and the media. Researchers are instrumental in surveying and conducting fieldwork, enabling them to identify talented artisans and understand the reality of local musical cultures. They can play a pivotal role in saving endangered folk music traditions within each community. By considering the insights of researchers, the government and local authorities

can effectively preserve and maintain folk music in a sensible manner. The responsibility of the state and local authorities lies in creating policies to manage and encourage the preservation and development of folk music, aiming to unify the diverse cultural identities of the country. China serves as an example of a country that has made significant progress in this regard. Tang (2021)'s research on Chinese folk music in the 21st century demonstrates how centralized control has helped shape musical traditions from various ethnic and regional groups into a pluralistic heritage, contributing to the unity of the ancient Chinese state. Effective coordination between researchers, the state, and local authorities will be a crucial factor in preserving and nurturing the folk music art of the Ta Oi communities in Vietnam, particularly in the southern region.

And, to maintain the folk music and cultural heritage of a community, the local community - the owner of that heritage has a particularly important role, they will be the ones to maintain this heritage until the next generations. To accomplish this, media agencies need to continuously provide information and awareness about heritage for local communities, managers, and researchers to understand.

Conclusion

Folk music accompanies individuals throughout their life cycle, from the moment of birth until death. It serves as a lullaby for children while simultaneously imparting emotional and moral education from early infancy. Ta Oi folk music also acts as a means for young boys and girls to express love for one another. Moreover, music plays a significant role in the transmission of wisdom from the elderly to the younger generation during festivals and weddings, emphasizing the importance of familial and national love.

With its sacred nature, music acts as a sacred bridge connecting humans with the divine (Jang). It serves ceremonial purposes and holds great significance during funerals, allowing the Ta Oi people to express their grief and sorrow upon the loss of a loved one or community member. In village festivals and traditional religious rituals, village elders and chiefs utilize music melodies and prayers to communicate their desires to the gods. They seek blessings for their families, the prosperity of their village merchants, bountiful harvests, successful businesses, and overall happiness.

The melodies of folk songs hold significant cultural value within the Ta Oi ethnic group. They serve as integral components of important cultural events and express the distinct cultural nuances of the Ta Oi people. Through their system of melodies, scales, and rhythms found in folk songs such as Ar boch, Co Loi, and Cha Chap, as well as their instrument system, the Ta Oi culture is vividly represented.

The traditional folk music heritage of the Ta Oi people has evolved over centuries, shaped by their ancestors, and passed down through generations. It is an essential aspect of community life, contributing to the unique identity of the Ta Oi people compared to other ethnic groups in the region.

Close links between regulators, the media, researchers, and local communities and stakeholders are also needed to support the conservation and promotion of the musical heritage and folklore of the Ta Oi people, as well as that of many other ethnic groups in Vietnam management agency. Management agencies are to maintain this cultural heritage in line with its historical roots, as it is crucial to focus on community-centred preservation efforts, particularly during festivals and cultural events specific to the Ta Oi ethnic group. As history progresses, it becomes essential to devise effective conservation methods, including the establishment of folk music clubs within communities to professionalize folk music. Moreover, supporting both young and elderly artisans with regular financial assistance is vital, enabling them to dedicate their time and efforts to preserving and developing the folk art of their communities. A close collaboration between researchers, the central government, and local authorities is essential. By working together, they can successfully preserve the folk music heritage of the Ta Oi people and other ethnic communities. This collaborative approach ensures the continuity of folk music from one generation to the next, sustaining and promoting the unique musical and cultural identities of each community throughout different historical periods.

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Biography

Nguyen Dinh Lam, who obtained his PhD in Religious Studies in 2014 from the Vietnam Academy of Social Science, specializes in Religious Music. He holds a Bachelor of Musicology from the Vietnam National Academy of Music, which he received in 2005. With over 10 years of experience in folk music research at the Vietnamese Institute for Musicology, he has dedicated his research to various ethnicities such as the Tay, Nung, Thai, Ta Oi, Kho Mu, Co Tu, Pa Co, Cham, Cao Lan, and H Mong. Currently, Nguyen Dinh Lam teaches Vietnamese Traditional Performing Arts at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. His research interests primarily revolve around religious music and Vietnamese traditional performing arts. Throughout his academic career, he has contributed to the field by publishing more than 70 scientific articles in both national and international scientific journals.