

The Majruj Sound: Muslim Practitioners of Musical Performances in Bangkok

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Abstract

This research article deals with the Majruj performance of the Khon Lom Yen Club in Bangkok. The study took place in 2019-2020 investigating its background, transmission, Islamic views on performances, instruments, and musical contents. Research findings reveal that Majruj is a form of voice production based on traditional Islamic recitations accompanied by a variety of single-headed drums, while its lyrics adhered to Islamic teachings. The Khon Lom Yen Club was a gathering place of Islamic religious teachers who perform Majruj to propagate Islamic teachings to youths, support the learning of Al-Quran, and carry on the art of Majruj. The club members upheld the view that Muslims are allowed to sing and play music under conditions specified by Islamic laws. They learned their musical knowledge by rote, self-taught, as well as formal instruction. Most of the Khon Lom Yen club members were descendants of Malay Muslims who migrated to Bangkok during the early era of Bangkok settlement. At present, they gradually assimilated into a common set of national identity by speaking central Thai and adopting Thai names, while at the same time, maintaining their faith in Islam and their cultural identity through vocal performances.

Keywords: *Majruj, Capella Hym, Khon Lom Yen, Anashid, Islamic Voice Production, Thailand*

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Introduction

Similar to Li-ke Riab and Nasep, Majruj is a kind of performing art forms in Islamic culture in the central region of Thailand. Islam, which was disseminated through the arrivals of Arab traders to Malaya and Thailand, has brought with it the Arabic language, traditions, arts, and culture. Muslims from different regions may have different performing arts. Southern Thailand Muslims perform Li-ke Hulu, Rong Ngeng, and Mayong while Muslims in Bangkok and the nearby provinces have Majruj and Nasep.

In Bangkok, the Muslim melodic recitation can be divided into three types as follows:

1. Anashid is from Arabic language. It means singing. Anashid or Nasyid is a kind of singing that is approved by the provisions of Islam. According to Nuamsamli (2021:64), when the word anashid arrived to the southern part of Thailand, it became nashid. Later, when the Muslim moved to Bangkok, the word anashid was shorten and became nasep. Chami (2019:141) explained that anashid (or anasyid) refers to recited, chanted, or sung poetry in the Islamic contexts. He also noted that the most recent genre of anashid is that of nashid or nasyid, popular in Muslim societies of Southeast Asia and serving to unify transnational Muslims in this region (Ibid:142). Uejitmet (2017:254) referred to anashid as follows:

Disseminating Islamic teachings can be done in various ways. One of the popular ways is the recitation called “anashid,” a prayer to glorify God chanting a cappella or accompanied with only single-headed drums. The occasions religiously allowed for the chanting of anashid are wedding ceremonies, Hari Raya festival, Maulid festival, and the anashid competitions (Uejitmet, 2017:254).

2. Majruj is a melodic recitation with religious contexts such as the praising of God and the prophets. The accompanying instrument is the single-headed drum. Though its contexts are similar to anashid, Majruj's rhythms are often faster. Anishchenkova (2020: 270) referred to the history of Majruj that it is a musical art genre of the Ta'if and Asian regions, in the west of Saudi Arabia, and is believed to be almost a millennium year old. It is performed by men. In Arabic, Majruj means “to pull” or “to extend,” in reference to the way it is sung, that is with longer note durations and holding the last syllable of each verse. Urkevich (2015: 212) said that the lyrics of Majruj have a poetic meter. They are romantic, eulogistic, and philosophic, and can vary greatly. Every participant sings while playing a frame drum or singled-headed drum. Other melodic instruments accompany Majruj performances in Bangkok.
3. Nasep, according to Numvol, P., Pansuea, V. and Tangdachahiran, J. (2013:71-72), is folk music of the Muslims with lyrics about Islamic teachings. The word “Nasep” was derived from the Malay word "Nasyid" or "Na-se" and has been shortened to Nasep after Muslims in Pattani migrated to live in today's Minburi District, Bangkok. At present, the performances of Nasep are accompanied by several instruments, such as violin, accordion, cymbals, and maracas to make the performances more enjoyable. Lyrics admiring the beauty of nature are introduced as well, though most of them remain religious. Binson (2022:16) who studied the Zainab band, a contemporary Nasep band that is popular in Bangkok, has found that besides the single-headed drum, the Zainab band

also added western and electric instruments. Its performances were adaptable from traditional Islamic Nasep to Thai country style or string combo, with or without dancers according to the event's host.

These three melodic chants are developed from the Al-Quran recitation which expresses in two styles, the concise recitation, used in the prayer, and the recitation in rhythmic prose which is developed into the Anashid chanting and Anashid is in turn developed into Majruj. The main objective of the Anashid is to remind people of God. Therefore, its contents are restricted to saying the names of God, praising the mightiness of the Prophet, and inducing people to do good deeds. As for Majruj, single-headed drums, Darbuka and Doumbek, are used to keep strokes and enhance more powerful tempo of the songs. The languages used are mostly Arabic and Malay, and currently, there are some Thai Anashid repertoire which was borrowed by the Majruj. The Majruj band in Bangkok often performs by using traditional songs since the rhythms of the contemporary ones do not balance with the contents of the lyrics.

The Background and the Management of Khon Lom Yen Majruj Club

Khon Lom Yen Club was a gathering of 10 Fardhu Ain (basic Islam course) teachers who were all skillful Qari to do activities for common interests since 2014. They created a Facebook page "Chomrom Khon Lom Yen" to teach the recitation of Al-Quran and Arabic language to disadvantaged children, allowing them and those who were interested to easily access the Al-Quran lessons with no charge. They later founded a band performing Anashid and Majruj. Their performances were recorded as video clips presented on their page to conserve the recitation arts as there were only a few Anashid and Majruj performed these days and the new generation prefers the Nasep and the songs in Arab-Malay style. The Facebook page of Khon Lom Yen Club got many followers, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, both in Thailand and abroad. When the club was widely known, it started its live performances in traditional festivals, school fairs, and charity fairs. Khon Lom Yen Club's specialty was the songs in Al-Quran reciting style since the singers were qari teachers who all passed national level contests.

The Khon Lom Yen Majruj Club consisted of 16 performers. All members worked together like a family. Since they all held their full-time work during the day, each performance depended on the convenience of the members, especially the lead singer, and the availability of the performing equipment such as the audio set. As some members of the club were teachers or students of the Masoh Hatuddeen school, the club borrowed the drums from the school and also used the school as the rehearsal locale. The duration of each performance was approximately 1-1.30 hours, and about 10 songs were played alternating with speaking at intervals to let the performers have some rest. The Khon Lom Yen Club performs Majruj was free of charge, accepting only expenses for meals and travel. The club members were intended to use their free time to promote knowledge of Islam, conserve and disseminate Islamic cultural arts, and help in charity activities.

Members of Khon Lom Yen Club were all Muslim. Most of them live in the eastern districts of Bangkok such as the districts of Wang Thonglang, Bueng Kum, Khanna Yao, Prawet, and Suan Luang and some owned houses by the San Saeb canal in the area. Few of them came from provincial areas, namely, Pathum Thani, Nakhon Nayok, and Phetchburi. Most mem-

bers of the club were descendants of Malay Muslims who were moved from Pattani, an old kingdom in Southern Thailand, to Bangkok in the early Rattanakosin era. The Pattani Muslims were given arable lands and settled down on the eastern part of present-day Bangkok, especially by the Saen Saeb canal which was dug by Muslim labors in the reign of King Rama I. Subsequently, in the following eras, these Muslim people spread to settle along the newly dug canals in Pathum Thani Province and Nakhon Nayok Province, which remained as Muslim localities until today. Living in harmony with Buddhists, members of Khon Lom Yen Club were able to speak the Thai language fluently. Only two of them were still able to speak Malay which is Yingniyom, U., the band's drummer, who came from the Muslim community in Pathum Thani Province where people still kept speaking Malay, and Phetrod, M. who came from the Muslim community in Phetchburi Province and spoke mixed Malay and Phetchburi dialect with a rural accent. All members of Khon Lom Yen Club had studied Islam and the Arabic language according to their religious traditions. Most of them had finished the compulsory education of secondary school year 3 from formal and non-formal Thai schools. Some of them continued their study in vocational education and higher education. They all had their main occupation and perform Majruj as philanthropic activities to encourage morality in Muslim people and disseminate Muslim culture with no intention to get any income.

Singers of Khon Lom Yen Club used to be Qaris and have practiced reciting the Al-Quran correctly, clearly, and melodically. They explained that they have learned to pronounce each of the 28 Arabic alphabets skillfully, and have known their sound bases which started from the bottom of the neck up to the lips, all of which allowed them to chant the Anasyid better. The chanting of Majruj were developed from the reciting of Al-Quran in rhythmic prose style which consisted of four pitches and was often read from the low one or the chest. The reciting in rhythmic prose style and the Anashid chanting both included rising and falling intonations and tremolos, though trills and tremolos were used more in the Al-Quran reciting while the chanting of Anasyid is more flowing. Most of the Anashid and Majruj singers did not study music formally but they learned to pronounce the assigned words from the chest, neck, or mouth. The singing focused on the vocals of the lead singer with the chorus of the low, medium, and high voices. The Khon Lom Yen Club's band often rehearsed together with microphones on, since the sound of oral vocalization and microphone vocalization were different, so their voices had to be adjusted to be in harmony.

The Learning and the Transmission of Music Knowledge of Khon Lom Yen Club

Drummers of Khon Lom Yen Club acquired their drumming knowledge as follows:

1. Self-learning. Drummers who acquired their drumming knowledge by self-learning are Yingniyom, U. who had learned from watching youtube for 8 years. Famud, K. who had also learned the Doumbek drum from youtube and Boonmalert, L. who has learned drumming by self-taught, learning from his friends and from music events in the school where he was a teacher.
2. Learning with the experts. A band's drummer, Yingniyom, U., has got a scholarship from the Indonesian government to study drumming with drum artists in Jakarta, Indonesia. He has learned various types of drums, from their notes to the ways to hold the drums, the ways to use each finger separately, and the drum beating from the basic one to the

solo. Back in Thailand, Yingniyom also taught the techniques he learned to his fellow drummers in the band.

3. Learning music in schools. A band drummer, Famud, K. has learned various musical instruments such as a drum set and guitars while he was in his secondary education.

In their performances, the drummers of Khon Lom Yen Club rehearsed individually before joining together. There were four drummers in the band, two players set the timing and supporting, and two play did the solo parts. The drumming style was of the ancient Arabic style added with Indonesian tricks transmitted from Yingniyom, U. They practiced by drumming to the songs without using musical notations. Most of the songs played were well-known ones. Therefore, lyrics were sent to singers to be individually practiced before gathering on the day of the event. Only unfamiliar songs were practiced together.

As for the transmission of the musical knowledge, Famud, K. taught drumming to interested youths on the condition that they must be experienced in Al-Quran reciting and Anashid chanting; and Yingniyom, U. taught his drumming tricks to his fellow drummers in the club. No ritual to pay homage to teachers or the drum was performed in the band. Only one prohibition was observed; women were not allowed to play drums as it violated religious law since it was considered as social behaviors to attract men.

Khon Lom Yen Club allowed to recruit female singers, Famud, Y. and Sukthaworn, K. Though not supported by Islamic laws which did not encourage women to appear as the center of attention in public, those female singers received good admiration from the audience which could be regarded that the Muslim society in Bangkok was quite open-minded, not seriously strict with the rules about women, and the gender equality was somewhat acceptable. However, women singers dressed modestly and wore hijabs conforming to Islamic laws and men also dressed in Islamic attire.

Besides entertaining their Islamic community with their Majruj, as the members of Khon Lom Yen Club were teachers of Islam. Therefore, they were entrusted to coach the children in the community and were invited to be speakers in Muslim youths' summer camps. Therefore, it could be concluded that the members of Khon Lom Yen Club played various roles in the community, promoting Islam, preserving their cultural art, and supporting the ethics of Muslim youths.

Khon Lom Yen Club performed Majruj in school's annual charity fairs, Muslim traditional festivals, organization events, and occasionally wedding ceremonies. They did not perform at funerals which are considered mournful events, and inappropriate for singing which was a cheerful performance.

Islamic Views Concerning Music and Musical Performances

In Islam, there were various views regarding music and musical performances. Some strictly did not allow all kinds of music, and some allowed them on certain conditions. Daoh, R. (2010:14-15) said that Islamic rules allowed the singing of songs whose contents resided in Islamic morality, encouraged faith in Allah, and promoted good deeds. Women's singing could only be performed among the female audience and the only permissible musical instrument was the duff drum.

Partially different, Numvol, P., Phansue, V. and Tangdajahiran, J. (2013:71) observed that according to Islamic rules, the prohibition on playing and singing could be flexible in some cases such as on the occasion of welcoming important persons, wedding celebrations, proper fun fairs, pure sports, lullabies, where songs were spirited uplifting, encouraged people to perform religious activities and not related to contents such as romantic affairs between women and men. Al-Qaradawi, Y. (296-300) also stated that Islam allowed singing provided that it was not obscene or harmful to Islamic morals, no matter if it was the gesture in singing, song lyrics, or surrounding acts. Phoasavadi, P. (2020:119-121) also noted that in the Bangkok Anashid contests where women were allowed to join, there was a condition that the songs must not be obscene or sexually related.

However, Mahasiratanaroj, N. (2016:2) said that Islamic scholars were still debating whether Muslims could sing, play and listen to music. As such, scholars had interpreted religious laws differently. The first group viewed that singing and playing music was permissible in all cases since no religious ordinance (Hadith) directly stated against the ban on playing music and singing. The second group interpreted the hadith as being able to play music and sing in some cases, such as at weddings, parties, and welcoming travelers. The third group considered music to be forbidden under any circumstances and considered a great sin. Therefore, it was still an argument that depended on the views of each religious scholar. Accordingly, one still held a right to choose to believe in any aforementioned viewpoints. Khon Lom Yen Club can be seen to choose the viewpoints that allowed the singing and performing of music under some conditions which was a way to carry on the Majruj, one of the Muslim performing cultures, and at the same time using the Majruj to promote Islam to the new generation. The idea conforms to Binson, B. et al. (2011:43) who proposes that culture plays a crucial role in how individuals identify with their community and reflects one's way of life in society since culture carries the core characteristics of one's social group.

The Musical Contents

Khon Lom Yen Club's music style was a chorus singing which emphasized the middle-range register, that of the leading singer, while the chorus opted for the intervals of a third or fifth. The melodies were usually slow according to the lyric's contents. Most of the times the club performed were of the Anashid repertoire. Some of which were old and some have just been brought from youtube or CD, originally from the Arab countries, and adapted into the club's style. The singing began with Anashid and was followed by the Majruj. Voices were tuned to the highest pitch in the song, a technique derived from the Quranic recitations. All songs of the Khon Lom Yen Club contained lyrics concerning the Prophets, praising God, and encouraging faith, without any romantic element.

The Khon Lom Yen Club has demonstrated 5 songs for the research, each has its details as follows:

The prelude, called Mogod Dima, was a drumroll piece. The function was to attract attention and prepare the audience's musical perception and concentration to focus on the performance.

The first tune was Tala Al Badru Alayna. According to the band leader, the band members believed that it was the chant that the Medina people used in welcoming and praising the Prophet.

The second tune was Nassam Alayna El Hawa. It was an old Arabic folk song glorifying the greatness of Allah in creating all natures. The Arabic tune was consisted of the unrhymed verse, the lead singing verse, and the chorus, and then returned to the unrhymed verse and the chorus again. It also included the half-spoken and half-singing verse as well.

The third tune was Ya Badrotim. It was a tune praising the Prophet Muhammad, telling of his proper behaviors and his words which should be followed.

The fourth tune was titled "Shuba Ruenung Bhand." It was an Indonesian song, that encouraged Muslims to think of God who created all natures.

The fifth tune was Ya Rasulullah (O the great Prophet of Islam). It was about the Prophet who received the Al-Quran from God. Muslims must follow the words and behaviors of the Prophet and must frequently praise the Prophet Muhammad and Allah.

The Instruments of the Khon Lom Yen Majruj Club's Band

The Majruj performances of Khon Lom Yen Club were accompanied by single-headed drums as follows:

1. The Tom Tom drum was a single leather-headed drum.
2. The Darbuka drum was an Arab-origin drum, used to play delicate rhythms. Two Darbuka drums, brought from Indonesia, were included in the band and the drummers are Yingniyom, U., and Boonmalert, L.
3. The Doumbek drum was also an Arabic-style drum giving a bass sound and was used to lead and control the band. Doumbek drummers of the band were Phueakphong, M. and Famud, K. who played their drums with consistent and supporting patterns while Yingniyom and Boonmalert played their Darbuka drums in solo styles.

Drums of Khon Lom Yen Club's Band



Figure 1. The First Doumbek drum. Source: Phoasavadi, photo taken on February 19, 2019.



Figure 2. The second Doumbek drum. Source: Phoasavadi, photo taken on February 19, 2019.



Figure 3. The First Darbuka drum. Source: Phoasavadi, photo taken on February 19, 2019.



Figure 4. The Second Darbuka drum. Source: Phoasavadi, photo taken on February 19, 2019.

Discussion

The Khon Lom Yen Club began its activities with the teaching of Al-Quran recitation and went on to perform the Anashid and Majruj recitation, two old Islamic performing cultures which were presented strictly following Islamic laws. However, to approach the new generation, their performances were presented through Facebook, a modern electronic channel. Their way of presentation unites the old world with the modern world which was considered a cultural orientation or cultural dynamics. Binson, B. (2011: 382) explained

that, to survive, cultural orientation naturally occurs according to the changing surroundings and different cultural ecology. An example of such cultural orientation was knowledge transmission which was adapted from orally to electronically according to the present-day advanced technology. Similarly, musical performances were adapted from stage shows to presentations on social media spread along with globalization.

Historically and socially, most of Khon Lom Yen Club's members are descendants of Pattani Malays who were brought to Bangkok in the early Rattanakosin era and were the main laborers in digging the Saen Saeb canal. Therefore, they settled by the canal and in the eastern area of Bangkok. At present, these Pattani Malays assimilated to the mainstream society of Bangkok. Some of members of Khon Lom Yen Club have been educated in regular Thai schools. Though most of them were not able to speak Malay, they still held their faith in Islam and behave strictly according to Muslim ethics. They also transmitted their religious beliefs and cultural performance to the next generation. Sutthasat, A. (1977:76) referred to a cultural characteristic which made one proud of their roots and remained the collective memories so that it needed to be transmitted to the next generation to protect it from discontinuity and loss. Muslims tried their best to maintain their cultural identity though their musical practice that would not violate their religious belief. The ways of life of the Pattani Malays in Bangkok interacting with the main society can be explained as acculturation with integration strategy which Berry, J. W. (2017:23) pointed out that the process occurred when the non-dominant ethnocultural group was interested in both maintaining one's original culture and having daily interactions with other groups. Consequently, there were some degrees of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time, the members of the ethnocultural group participated as an integral part of the larger society. Bangkok can be considered a plural society but much needed to be discovered and promoted such as the Khon Lom Yen Club. Van Roy, E. (2017:xi) pointed out that Bangkok was a diverse town since the early Rattanakosin era as it was the city where people from Ayudhya migrated from war, the center to put the prisoners of war, and a port and market for foreign traders who settled down as small groups of various races. Today, there are still many communities of different ethnicities, different cultures, and beliefs in Bangkok. Though people in these ethnic communities have become Thai, they still maintained their original cultures as the Malay Muslims in this study.

Musical practices of Muslim communities in Bangkok were vibrant and still were not investigated thoroughly due to being under the dominance of mainstream pop music, folk music, and traditional music of the country. Some of major bands had ceased to perform and talented musicians changed careers. It was unfortunate that their biography, life history of their musical careers, and their musical achievements had not been recorded. Nuamsamli (2021) began to marvelously document the development of Islamic music cultures and identities in the central region of Thailand.

Conclusion

Majruj was a kind of Muslim melodic recitation in Bangkok comprising of seventeen up to nineteen performers. It was a male chorus singing in unison accompanied by different types of single and doubled headed drums. Each singer accompanied himself with a drum. Drums were from the origin of Arabic music cultures and also other types of non-Arabic drums were included. As it was often sung with traditional songs, Majruj was still popular

among traditional gatherings in Muslim communities and traditional festivals in Bangkok. The Majruj band of Khon Lom Yen Club was a gathering of teachers of Islam religion. The objectives of their performances were to support the learning of the Al-Quran and Arabic language and to show in charity fairs and religious festivals free of charge to carry on the Muslim original cultural performance. Members of the band were all acquaintances; the band's management carried out between friends. The knowledge was transmitted to the youths through volunteering activities such as teaching in summer camps and presenting music performance clips on social media. As for the religious views towards singing and playing music, Khon Lom Yen Club's members viewed that Muslims could perform, sing and play music as long as the songs and the performance's surroundings conformed to Islamic laws; the lyrics concerning the praising of God and the Prophets, and the instruments used are single-headed drums. Most of the drummers learned drumming by rote and learned in school. Only one drummer methodically learned the drum course from abroad and came back to teach and develop the techniques of Khon Lon Yen's Majruj band to conserve the performing culture of their ethnic group.

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