

Wai Khru Ceremony

: The Life and Soul of Thai Music

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THAI life is bound with multicultural beliefs: native supernatural beliefs, Brahmanism, Hinduism, and Buddhism that derived from India. This mixture of beliefs formed the foundation of Thai culture, social practices, and has become the breath of Thai people for centuries. **The Wai Khru** ceremony in Thai traditional music represents this constructed belief in a form of ceremony that brings together religious beliefs, Thai morals, and the socio-cultural practice that influenced Thai music and musicians.

The essence of the **Wai Khru** ceremony in Thai traditional music

The term "**Khru**" in Thai refers to teacher. It has the same meaning of terms of **Guru** in Sanskrit. Teacher or **Khru** in Thai society holds more meaning than just a person who teaches. Besides the role of teaching knowledge, **Khru** teaches students social behavior, benevolence, proper social manners, marriage life, professional practice, knowledge of traditions and norms, and provides all kinds of guidance to the student's life. Thru these, **Khru** is regarded as the second parents to the student and leader of the society. In Thai culture, music composers, musicians, singers, instrument makers and all who give knowledge in music, are considered **Khru**. Even **Khru** had passed away, the spirit of **Khru** still live in students' hearts.

In response to the kindness **Khru** has given to his students, the students express their gratitude toward **Khru** through obedience, love, and faith, as well as the **Wai Khru** ceremony, in which the word "**Wai**" indicates the action of paying respect.

In the old days, Thai music was considered a high art performed in court, noble houses, and for important rituals. Due to this high function in society, any Thai musician who held the status of **Khru** was a master of knowledge and wisdom in both music theory and performance practice to educate students to be a qualified musician. In addition to the word "**Khru**," Thai musicians also use the term "**phor khru**," which means a respected master or father, to display the esteemed gratitude and respectfulness students have toward their teacher. For Thai musi-

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cians, "**Khru**" does not only indicate the human **Khru** who presently teaches music, but also all of the human **Khru** who have passed away. This lineage of **Khru** may date back to several decades or even centuries, and these **Khru** have the status of gods that connect students to religious and supernatural beliefs. Through this concept, **Khru** is the center of Thai music and the highest essence to the heart and soul of Thai musicians.

Thai society embraces several Thai musical cults and schools that have their own distinctive performance practices and traditions. The uniqueness in musical practices, along with the tradition of the **Wai Khru** ceremony, is passed down from teachers to students, generation to generation within the school. The practice of the ceremony differs in its norms, details of the procedures, the incantation of **Wai Khru**, and ceremonial music for invoking the spirits of **Khru** and inviting **Khru** to the ceremony. The differences mark the crucial points in Thai culture that influence the stability of Thai society. Unfortunately, the details and procedures of the ceremony are kept as secrets, known only to the elderly **Khru** who have performed the role of the master in ceremonies. The knowledge of the ceremony that is passed down to students is very little compared to the whole. It is necessary to collect all the information about the ceremony before it disappears from the society in order to maintain the stability in Thai culture and preserve the valuable knowledge inherited from Thai ancestors.

Khru and the role of Khru in the Wai Khru ceremony

As mentioned, **Khru** includes both human **Khru**, **Khru** in the form of spirits, and **Khru** in the status of Gods; all **Khrus**, regardless of their presence and form, are invited to the ceremony. Besides the spirit of dead human **Khru**, there are 9 **Khru** with the status of Gods that are presented on the altar in the ceremony. Together with the spirit of human **Khru**, **Khru** could be categorized into 4 groups:

Group 1 ***Trimurti*** or Supreme Gods consist of Brahma (Phra Phrom), Vishnu (Phra Narai), and Shiva (Phra Siwa)

Group 2 Gods of Music consist of Phra Panjasikhon (God of Chordophone), Phra Visanukam (God who invents musical instruments), and Phra Prakhonthap (God of Percussion instruments and rhythm)

Group 3 Hindu Gods and Hermits consist of God of Arts and success called Ganesha (Phra Pikanet), Phra Phiraap (a demonic giant who eats only raw meat and living animals), Phra Naat Ruesi, and other 108 hermits.

Group 4 Spirits of human **Khru** are represented in the ceremony by placing their photos on the altar (see Figure 1-4)



Phra I-suan



Phra Phrom



Phra Nari

Figure 1 Trimurti or Supreme Gods consist of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva



Phra Panja-si-khon



Pra Wishnu-kam



Phra Prakhonthap

Figure 2 Gods of music: Phra Panjasikhon, Phra Visanukam, and Phra Prakhonthap



Ganesha



Phra Phi-raap



Phra Naat Ruesi

Figure 3 Angels and Hermits consist of Ganesha (Phra Pikkonet), Phra Phiraap, Phra Naat Ruesi



Figure 4 Photos of passed away human ***Khru***

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According to religious belief and traditions, there are a great number of both good and bad spirits in which some of the spirits are considered ***Khru***. There is a connection of Thai belief concerning the belief of Hindu gods (from India) and minor god and goddess whom musicians pay respect. For example, Phra Wishanu-kam is the most important spirit who creates all instruments of the world. Phra Panja-si-khon is the teacher of string instrument as well as Phra Pra-khon-thap is the teacher of drum and rhythm.

These 4-groups of Khru establish the foundation of belief and faith for Thai musicians. The story of Khru Gods survives in legend, literature, folktale, and rumor, creating a close relationship to the life of Thai musicians. Through this strong belief, musicians trust their life and soul to all the status of ***Khru***.

Master of the ***Wai Khru*** Ceremony

Written sources and interviews indicate that the number of Khru who are qualified for functioning in the role of the master in the ***Wai Khru*** ceremony as 155. Their role is to be a representative of the humans in connecting to the ***Khru*** Gods, ***Khru*** hermits, and the spirits of passed away human Khru by leading the prayer, worshipping, and reading the incantation of the ***Wai Khru***. Perceptively, the ***Khru*** master is a medium of the actual world - that is, the real presentation of students participating in the ceremony, placing the masks symbolizing ***Khru*** Gods at the altar, photos of passed away human Khru, musical instruments, sacrifices and offerings, and performing Nha-part repertoires, presenting gestures and emotional expressions - with the abstract world of complex imagination, belief and faith.

There is no gender or age specification for being a master of ***Wai Khru*** ceremony. Usually a master of the ***Wai Khru*** ceremony is the owner of music school, the head of a musical troop, or director of a musical ensemble. They are the ones who keep control of the ceremonial procedures, send the blessings to their passed away teachers, and offer the sacrifices in the ceremony. In the old days, the ceremonial procedure was done with simplicity. Eventually, it adopted the procedures from the ***Wai Khru*** ceremony for Theatrical Art and more procedures and rules were added, resulting in the complexity of the ceremony in Thai traditional music. Besides the qualification of being an accepted musician and teacher, a master of the ceremony

needs to manage the knowledge and skill of performing all the Nha-part repertory. A male needs to pass the monkhood status, strictly following the 5-rules of morality to establish a respectful and pure image. Since the readjusting of the ceremonial procedures with theatrical art practices, the 155 masters of the ceremony could be divided into 8 major denominations according to their schools, including Phra Praditpairau (Mi Khaek), Kanlayanamittavas (Tab), Tang (Suntornwatin), Nim Phoaiem, Praneatworasap (Khean Woravatin), Jangvang Suan Chidtuam, Preang Granlert, and other small denominations.

Tradition and Procedure in the Ceremonial Setting

The ceremonial area consists of places to position the image of Buddha, the ***Khru*** altar, musical instruments, sacrifices, and ceremonial tools for master of the ceremony. The most important place representing the center of the ceremony is the ***Khru*** altar, where the masks of ***Khru*** Gods, ***Khru*** hermits, Khru Taphoon, musical instruments used in the institution regardless of its ethnic identity, and photos of passed away human ***Khru*** are located. In setting the instruments, Ta-phoon, the most important rhythmic percussion or the teacher's drum is set at the middle of the altar and is wrapped around with the white cloth. Others instruments are set at the lower altar levels on both sides of the Ta-phoon.

In addition to Khru altar, sacrifices consist of cooked and raw foods, and hot dessert are considered important materials to the ceremony that cannot be omitted.

Positioning of ***Khru*** masks at the altar

The belief in reincarnation, life after death, and the spiritual world is very strong in Thai society. Thai musicians believe that their lives are tied with their teacher regardless of the status and form of their teachers. Because of the belief that the spirits live can acknowledge the deeds that students do, the photos of passed away ***Khru*** are placed below the masks of ***Khru*** Gods at the altar with a prayer proclaiming the word of invitation to invite the spirits to the ceremony.

Positioning ***Khru*** masks at the altar could be done in several ways. For the standard practice of having nine Gods in the ceremony, the rank of the Gods determines their arrangement. ***Phra Isuan*** (Shiva) is placed at the center, having ***Phra Narai*** (Vishnu), ***Phra Wisanukam***, ***Phra Prakhon-thap***, ***Phra Luesi*** (Hermit God) at the right side. On the left of Shiva are ***Phra Phrom*** (Brahma), ***Phra Panja-si-khon***, ***Phra Pikanet*** (Ganesha), and ***Phra Phi-raap*** (see Figure 5).



1. Phra Luesi (Hermit in gold)
2. Phra Wishnu-kam (Green)
3. Phra Pra-khon-thap (Green)
4. Phra Narai (purple or gold)
5. Phra Shiwa (white)
6. Phra Phrom (white,4 faces)
7. Phra Panja-si-khon (white or green)
8. Ganes (elephant ,red)
9. Phra Phi-raap (dark brown with gold)

Music and repertories in the *Wai Khru* ceremony

The ensemble that performs in the ceremony is the *Pi-phat* ensemble, which developed during the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767). The role of the *Pi-phat* ensemble is to perform ceremonial music that connects human belief associated with society, culture, religions and traditions. The belief system of Thai people is complex, mixing supernatural beliefs with spiritual beliefs, Brahmanism, and Buddhism.

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Procedures of the *Wai Khru* Ceremony in Thai traditional music

According to traditional procedure, the *Wai Khru* ceremony is performed on Thursday since Thursday is regarded as a teacher's day. Later, Luang Pradit-phai-rau (Sorn Sinlapabanoleng, 1881-1954) one of the great master of the *Wai Khru* Ceremony saw the inconvenience in using Thursday as a ceremonial day since Thursday is a working day in which most of the participants have to work. Laung Pradit-phai-rau therefore initiated Sunday as another day to perform the *Wai Khru* ceremony. The ceremony starts early in the morning in accordance with the belief that *Khru* Gods and spirits have to finish taking the sacrifices and offerings before noon. The norm and tradition of the *Wai Khru* ceremony has divided the ceremony in 3 steps: the process of a Buddhist ceremony, the process of *Wai Khru*, and the process of teacher and students. Throughout these steps, the Nha-phat repertoires are chosen to function in each process. The master of ceremony leads participants throughout the ceremonial procedures including leading the pray to show respect to *Khru*s. He then declares the name of each Gods of music with an incantation of invitation the *Khru* Gods and spirits to the ceremony. After the word of invitation, the ensemble performs a special song for each God, which is expected to arrive at the ceremony during the performance of the song. Gods of music and spirits process to the ceremony with their animal vehicles and servants. They are invited to sit at the site of the ceremonial hall. After the arrival of *Khru*s, sacrifices and offerings are presented to them. Again, special song from the Nha-phaat repertoires for accompanying the process of sitting, eating, and drinking is called until the end of all the procedures.

The first process: Buddhist ceremony

This process is the worshipping of the Three Jewels and Angels. It begins with the incantation of the *Wai Khru* ceremony, saying the *Na-mo* prayer 3 times, the incantation of worshipping the Three Jewels, Shinasri, and calling the Angels. The incantation also indicates the student's gratitude to parents and teachers. The master of the ceremony calls for four pieces from the repertoire: Sadhukan, *Sadhukan-klong*, *Tra-gling*, and *Tra-chern*.

The second process: The Wai Khru

The second process is dealing with praising the ***Khru***, inviting ***Khru Gods***, ***Khru*** hermits, and ***Khru*** spirits to the ceremony, and pleading the ***Khru*** for protection. The music used in this process is very complicated and varies among schools and denominations. It begins with the master of the ceremony proclaiming the incantation and inviting ***Khru*** Gods to the ceremony by calling the name of each ***Khru***. The music for this process is Hom-rong repertoire for the supreme Gods and their procession, repertoires to represent each ***Khru*** God and hermit including ***Tra Narai ban-thom-sin***, ***Tra Phra Pra-khon-thap***, ***Tra-Phra-Visanugram***, ***Tra-Praluesi kalaiyakod***, and repertoires related to blessings and/or ceremonial processions to accept the sacrifices and offerings such as ***Samer-tain***, ***Samer-marn***, ***Samer-Phi***.

The third process: Offer the sacrifices and offerings

The third process is the process of offering the sacrifices to ***Khru*** and asking ***Khru*** to depart the ceremony and process back to their places. After the incantation of offering and sacrifices, the master of the ceremony calls for ***Phram-khao repertoire***, ***Nang-gin repertoire***, and ***Sen-lao repertoire***. The next step is the departure of the ***Khru*** from the offering and their procession back to their places. Repertoires are ***Samer khao-ti***, and Phram-oak. After these repertoires are performed is the process of spreading popped rice, anointing the masks of ***Khru*** Gods, photos of passed away human ***Khru***, and instruments.

The last step is the step of teacher and students. This final step indicates the action in this present human world in which the goal of the process is to build the relationship between teacher and students. The master of the ceremony sprinkles the holy water on students, anointing the student's face, and putting the ***ma-toom*** leaf at the student's ear. Some students who want to learn the ***Nha-part*** repertoires will have the master of the ceremony hold their hands to perform the beginning of the piece. After this step is completed, the Pi-phat ensemble performs ***Cherd-klong repertoire*** and ***Kroa ram repertoire***.

Music Used in the Ceremony

Songs perform in the ceremony might be slightly arranged in different order depending on the master of the ceremony. The example in the table below displays the list of the songs performed in the Wai Khru ceremony at the college of Theatrical Arts on Thursday 30, 1985:

Table 1 List of songs called by Khru Montree Tramote, the master of Wai Khru ceremony

No	List and Name of Songs	Function and Meaning
1	Sa-dhu-kaan	To pay respect to Lord Buddha
2	Sa-dhu-kaan Klong	To pay respect to all Khrus
3	Tra-San-ni-baat	Inviting Khrus to the Ceremonial Hall
4	Phraam khao	Marking the arrival of all Khru and Spirits
5	Hom-rong	Invitation of Pra Isuan (Greatest Hindu God)
6	Tra Na-rai-ban-thom-sin	Invitation of Narai from his place in the great ocean
7	Baat-sa-ku-nee	The arrival or coming of Narai (Hindu God)
8	Khoom Wean	The arrival of other spirits
9	Tra Phra Pra-khon-tap	Invittion to Par Prakhon-tap (god of rhythm)
10	Samer Thaern	Invitation to all Hermits (Pra Reusi)
11	Phra Phi-raap Tem Aung	Invitation to the Demon Phi-raap (giant)
12	Nang Kin	Invitation to sit and to eat the offering
13	Sen Lao	Presentation of liquor to all teacher
14	Phraam Auk	To mark an ending of paying respect to all spirit; this is also a song for departure of all Khrus and spirits
15	Samer Khao Thee	All Khrus and spirits arrive to their places.
16	Proey Khao-tok-dok-mai	Spreading pop rice and flowers, for greeting
17	Maha Chai	celebration to all students and participants
18	Cherd	Motivation music to mark the movement of return
19	Kroaw Ram	Greetings for the success and completed ceremony

It is essentially needed to perform the **Wai Khru** ceremony since it represents the continuing of traditional Thai music education. It initiates strength and stability of Thai music tradition as well as the unity among Thai musicians between older generation and the new generation. The music performed in the ceremony includes several significant repertoires that Thai music students need to know in order to continue Thai musical culture. The ceremony has instilled the belief and confidence in students to have success in learning and working because they have inscribed Khru in their heart and soul.



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