

## Saw Isan's Preservation and Literacy Transmission by Oun Tomngam

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Saw Isan's preservation and literacy transmission by Oun Tomngam. The study employed qualitative research methodologies, including interviews and observations. The findings of the study demonstrate that Saw Isan's artistic abilities go beyond strict postures and methods, including a range of activities that improve both the elegance and ease of playing. These principles not only serve to assist the act of playing but also play a key role in the preservation, transfer, and continued life of Saw Isan for future generations. The demonstration of proficiency in the art of playing the Saw Isan is exemplified by the utilization of distinctive methodologies, encompassing meticulous finger placement, adept manipulation of the bow, and proper bodily alignment. The utilization of these approaches has significant importance in the preservation and transmission of the unique traditions of Saw Isan, guaranteeing the continued flourishing of its abundant musical heritage. The incorporation of sliding and vibrato methods enhances the sonic complexity and artistic appeal of Saw Isan's musical compositions. These strategies not only enhance the musical experience but also play a role in the enduring preservation of Saw Isan.

**Key words:** Preservation, Literacy Transmission, Saw Isan, Oun Tomngam

### INTRODUCTION

Saw is a musical instrument classified as a string instrument, specifically belonging to the bowed string instrument category. It produces sound by using a bow to interact with the strings. There are two essential components: the vibration, which refers to the part of the instrument that vibrates, and the resonator, which amplifies the sound (Pikulski, 1987; Seekhunlio et al., 2023). It is believed that the name "Saw" for this type of string instrument might have originated after the sound is produced by pressing down on the strings. Even for Western string instruments that have been introduced and used in Thailand more recently, they are also referred to as "Saw." The "Saw" instrument consists of two main components: the bow and the resonator. At the end of the bow, there is a horizontal hole through which the rosin-coated stick can thread the two strings, allowing them to be tightened. The strings of the Saw are typically made from wire, often using bicycle brake wire for this purpose. To produce sound, the Saw is played similarly to other bowed string instruments, using a bow made of round, bent wood, usually with some horsehair attached to it. The horsehair makes contact with the Saw's strings, and the rosin applied to the bow creates friction between the strings and the horsehair, producing sound (Aiemsuk, 1984).

"Saw" musical instruments contain four main components: the soundbox, often known as the violin skull, the bow or string, the tailpiece or string holder, and the strings. The

music is played using a bow or a string. The strings' outer and lower ends make contact with the soundbox, which runs over the top of the violin skull. These strings wrap around the tailpiece and travel along the bow. Each string has its own knob for adjusting the tension for tone. By pressing the strings with the four fingers of the left hand, these knobs are utilized to modulate the sound. Each finger (except the thumb) presses the desired spot on the violin string. The instrument is held in place by the thumb. This kind of play is known as "Si Saw" (Kanchanaphalin, 1993).

Saw Isan is a traditional musical instrument in Thailand and a distinctive instrument of the Isan area in the country's northeast. It is made up of a waist-shaped wooden box and two strings. Typically, a tiny bamboo rod is placed above the strings, allowing players to make sound by pushing or manipulating the strings with their fingers. Saw Isan's playing method is distinctive. They pluck the bow and make distinct tones using their right thumb, index finger, and middle finger. This method allows players to quickly slide and vibrate the strings during performances, producing music that is full of passion and expression. In northeastern Thailand, the Saw Isan is often used to accompany traditional Isan music and dance, as well as theatrical events. Its clear and melodic tones provide a unique musical experience. The Saw Isan is extremely important in Thailand's northeastern area, not only displaying the distinct beauty of Thai folk music but also functioning as a key component of Thai culture (Yupho, 1967; Seeyo et al., 2023).

Oun Tomngam is a well-known folk artist and musician. He was invited to play the Saw Isan at Mor Lam Riang Tor Klom and the Isan Mahori band. He is generally regarded for his outstanding contributions to Isan music and has an impressive collection of work in this genre. Oun Tomngam also works as a prominent instructor, sharing his expertise of Isan folk music with a variety of educational institutions in Pathumrat District, Roi Et Province. He is also a special lecturer in folk music at Mahasarakham University's College of Music. Oun Tomngam was awarded the "Golden Nakarat" award by the Institute of Arts and Culture Research at Mahasarakham University in 2009 in appreciation of his excellent contributions to the arts and culture. He is a well-known Isan folk performer (The Research Institute of Northeastern Art and Culture, 2009).

The foregoing information has attracted the researchers' interest in the study of Saw Isan's preservation and literacy transmission, namely as carried out by Oun Tomngam. This study is culturally significant because it considers the cultural impacts on the development of solo music within the area of traditional music as well as the preservation and transmission of distinctive playing styles. The fundamental purpose of this research is to develop actual information that will benefit education both theoretically and practically. Furthermore, it intends to handle the critical issue of maintaining and developing Saw Isan's unique musical tradition, ensuring that it is passed down to future generations.

### Research Question

- How does Oun Tomngam contribute to the preservation and transmission of Saw Isan?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### General Knowledge About "Saw"

The study of "Saw" instruments and the categorization of musical instruments serves as a practical approach to delineating various types of musical instruments based on their sound-producing mechanisms. The nervous system has the ability to detect and interpret sound waves generated by the vibratory motion of things. Within the classification of musical instruments, there exists a category known as "string instruments," which encompasses those families that generate sound by means of string vibration. The aforementioned instruments encompass the violin, viola, cello, and double bass, in addition to other stringed instruments such as the piano (Rungruang, 2003).

The term "Saw" is speculated to have been borrowed from the Indian language, as the Indian three-stringed instrument in the Kashmir region is called "Saz" or may have come from the word "Saro," which is another name for the Indian instrument "Sarinda." Even in the northern region of Thailand, it is also known as "Saw Lo," "Salor," or "Talar," while among Cambodians, the Saw is referred to as "Taro" or "Taraw" (Chonpairot, 1986).

"Saw" refers to a musical instrument classified as a string instrument that generates sound by means of bowing the

strings with a rosined bow. In general, the classification of saws encompasses three primary categories, namely Saw Sam Sai, Saw Duang, and Saw U. Nevertheless, an alternative variant of the Saw may be traced back to its origins in the northeastern part of Thailand, where it is crafted using indigenous materials. These musical instruments encompass the Saw Bang, constructed from bamboo; the Saw Pib, fashioned from oil drum bodies; and the Saw Krapong, crafted using milk or paint cans. The nomenclature of these musical instruments is derived from the specific materials employed in the construction of their resonators (Yuenchiwit, 1996).

### General Knowledge About Saw Isan

The inclusion of "Saw Isan" in diverse traditional folk music groups has significantly enhanced the overall quality and artistic value of these musical performances. In the Isan area, many universities, including Mahasarakham University, Kalasin College of Dramatic Arts, and Roi Et College of Dramatic Arts, include music ensembles and cultural organizations that incorporate the Saw instrument into their performances. Certain musical groups employ the "Saw Bung" or "Saw Mai Phai" (bamboo Saw) instrument in the rendition of traditional Thai melodies, particularly within the Phu Thai music genre (Mekchaiyapak, 2002).

The Isan folk fiddle, known as the Saw Isan, is a distinctive string instrument with a simple yet ingenious construction. Its larynx, which forms the body of the instrument, can be crafted from a variety of materials like coconut shell, tin cans, shells, or bamboo, each lending its own unique character to the sound. The neck, usually made from hard woods like rosewood or padauk, holds the strings and allows for volume adjustment through knobs. The bow, formed by wooden pieces and horsehair or nylon strands treated with rosin, creates the vibrations necessary to produce the instrument's characteristic sound. Together, these components come together to give life to the vibrant and traditional music of the Isan region, exemplifying the rich cultural heritage of Thailand and underscoring the instrument's enduring significance and the imperative role it plays in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge for generations to come (Somsri, 2000; Seekhunlio & Chuangprakhon, 2022).

### Research Theory

This study combines two ethnomusicological theories to analyze and assess the qualities, evolutionary processes, and performance styles of Saw Isan, a traditional musical instrument of great cultural value. Furthermore, conclusions have been reached about the preservation, transmission, and knowledge of this musical legacy (Nettl, 2010; Stone, 2015). Aesthetics theory focuses on the complicated links between established creative forms and the cultural settings in which they exist, acknowledging their important importance in transmitting and embodying both individual and communal identities, as well as societal norms and values (Dake, 2005; Weitz, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

“Saw Isan’s Preservation and Literacy Transmission by Oun Tomngam” is a notable study project devoted to the surviving heritage of the Saw Isan musical culture. This study’s technique is based on ethnomusicology methodologies.

To begin, fieldwork is the foundation of this inquiry. Oun Tomngam worked directly with Saw Isan artists and communities in the Isan area, taking part in performances, interviews, and participant observation to get a thorough grasp of the tradition’s qualities and evolutionary processes.

Second, archival research and document analysis were used to trace Saw Isan’s historical growth and changes across time. This involved researching written records, pictures, and video artifacts that shed light on the history of the instrument and its importance in Isan culture.

Third, the study employs interviews and oral histories to document the processes of knowledge transfer. Conversations were held with master musicians and community members to learn how Saw Isan’s methods, repertoire, and cultural importance are passed down from generation to generation.

Data analysis includes collecting data, summarizing it using descriptive language, and doing qualitative assessments. In addition, audio-visual and archival research offered information on the instrument’s history and cultural context. The findings will be documented and given to the Isan community in order to help them understand Saw Isan preservation and transmission.

This study’s interdisciplinary approach attempts to present Saw Isan’s preservation, transmission, and cultural relevance, with Oun Tomngam’s experience acting as a crucial pillar in unraveling the complexities of this rich musical legacy.

## RESULTS

### Preservation and Transmission of Saw Isan by Oun Tomngam

The results of Oun Tomngam’s study on Saw Isan reveal that the artistry associated with this musical tradition transcends rigid postures and techniques. Instead, it encompasses a set of practices that elevate the grace and convenience of playing. These guidelines not only facilitate the act of playing but also make significant contributions to the preservation, transmission, and dissemination of knowledge surrounding this beloved musical heritage. The study’s results underscore the importance of these practices in perpetuating the Saw Isan tradition for future generations. And in preserving and transmitting the Saw Isan playing of Oun Tomngam, it consists of the following:

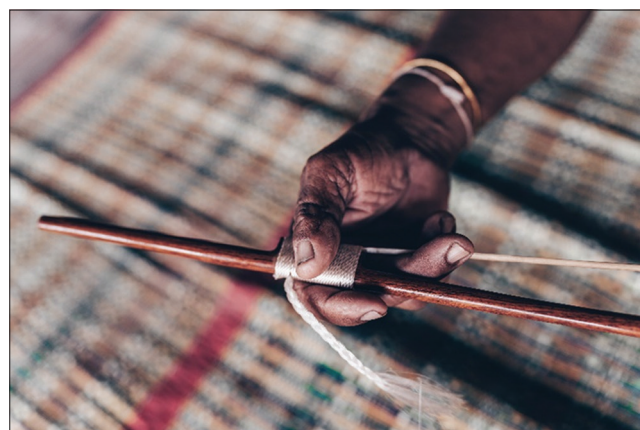
1. Fingering the Saw Isan necessitates certain hand placement and posture. Maintain a tight grasp on the “Saw” with your left hand, ensuring that the cross-piece is positioned between the base of your thumb and index finger. Raise your left elbow to a comfortable level, avoiding both excessive closeness to the body and unduly high placement, which may cause arm fatigue (Figure 1).
2. Pulling the Saw Isan’s bow requires precise hand positioning, which is an important factor in the

preservation, transmission, and knowledge of this musical legacy. The “Khan Chak,” or bow, is gripped firmly in the right hand, palm pointing almost upward, ensuring a stable grip for precise control. As seen in Figure 2, the index finger and thumb hold on tightly to the “Khan Chak,” but the middle or ring finger is expertly placed between the horsehair and the “Khan Chak.” These exact hand movements, as well as their faithful transmission, are critical to maintaining Saw Isan’s talent for future generations.

3. The proper alignment of the body during the performance of Saw Isan Oun Tomngam is a crucial element that significantly contributes to the preservation, diffusion, and transmission of this esteemed musical legacy. When adopting a sitting position, it is important to actively maintain a posture that is both upright and aligned in a vertical manner. To maintain optimal alignment, it is imperative to ensure that the hand clutching the Saw Isan neck and the “Khan Chak” intersect, hence retaining a cross formation for both components. The specific sitting posture, as illustrated, is exemplified in Figure 3.
4. When executing the Saw Isan technique in a standing position, it is crucial to ensure that the tail of the Saw is positioned at waist level. This positioning facilitates a



**Figure 1.** Saw isan hand and arm positioning  
Source: Han Han



**Figure 2.** Saw isan bowing hand placement  
Source: Han Han

natural angle that contributes to the seamless integration of the technique within the overall performance. The aforementioned perspective is visually depicted in Figure 4, which showcases the ideal arrangement for a cohesive and efficient Saw Isan presentation.

In the interview, Oun Tomngam shared significant perspectives that can be succinctly described as follows: It is crucial to acknowledge that these standards serve as a fundamental framework, and as players amass expertise, they may naturally cultivate their own styles and tactics. The Saw Isan is a highly adaptable tool that promotes ingenuity and personal interpretation, therefore enriching the diverse musical heritage of the Isan area. The versatility and possibility of personalizing the instrument are significant factors in the preservation, transmission, and long-term sustainability of its function within the cultural context of Isan.

### Enhancing Saw Isan Performance Techniques for Preservation and Literacy Transmission

1. Oun Tomngam's playing style for the Saw Isan entails applying a single finger to depress a particular note, then rapidly sliding down the string. Moreover, the



**Figure 3.** Saw isan sitting posture  
Source: Han Han



**Figure 4.** Saw isan standing performance stance  
Source: Han Han

Moreover, the precise application of the optimal level of pressure is of paramount significance. The application of inappropriate pressure may result in the production of distorted sound. This approach demonstrates optimal efficacy when executed, hence facilitating the seamless resonance of the strings. The utilization of string conversion techniques is frequently applied within this particular genre of music, serving to significantly augment the overall quality of performance. This, in turn, contributes to the preservation and transmission of the Saw Isan heritage.

2. In the setting of Saw Isan, Oun Tomngam brilliantly deploys a unique sliding technique, using his fingers to build a thrilling melodic journey inside the music. This approach, evocative of the rich Thai musical legacy, presents the art of sliding sounds, similar to a soloist skillfully mirroring their own singing to infuse delicate and nuanced melodic subtleties. This approach produces quick and nuanced sounds that seamlessly weave into the song by pressing a note and immediately shifting to a neighboring position or an adjacent note with the following fingers. This approach not only adds depth but also considerably improves the aesthetics of Saw Isan music, contributing to its long-term preservation and enabling its transmission to future generations of musicians.
3. The vibrato method plays a significant role in enhancing the unique appeal of Saw Isan. Oun Tomngam utilizes his dexterous fingers to produce engaging musical vibratos, which serve to increase the aesthetic appeal of performances, regardless of whether they are characterized by happy or languid rhythms. The incorporation of this approach enhances the intricacy and emotiveness of the music, rendering it an indispensable and highly valued characteristic of Saw Isan.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The musical heritage known as Saw Isan, which originates from the Isan region of Thailand, is characterized by its eclectic nature, encompassing a multitude of bands that each provide their own distinct sound and musical style. The variability shown in the present context is consistent with the findings of Pittayawat Pantasri (2003), whose research primarily examined Isan gamelan ensembles. A specific example from Thiam Khae Village in Roi Et Province serves to further illustrate the musical environment of the area.

Local peasants in Roi Et Province make the majority of the musical instruments used in Isan Mahori ensembles by hand, using locally available materials. The assortment of musical instruments, which encompasses the middle pipe, Pi Yod (Pi nok), large Saw (Saw U), little Saw (Saw Duang), Mahori drum, cymbals, and hole cymbals, exemplifies a community-oriented methodology aimed at safeguarding the genuineness of the music while simultaneously fostering a profound connection to the local heritage and cultural perpetuity. This technique aligns with the findings of Pawat Boonkan's (2009) research, which examined the Saw U, a

traditional musical instrument from Thailand. The musical instrument referred to as the Saw U is renowned for its resonant timbre, which emanates from the utilization of a particular variety of coconut known as the “Saw U coconut” in its construction. The coconut variety under consideration is predominantly cultivated within the geographical boundaries of Bang Khonthi District and Amphawa District, located in Samut Songkhram Province. The musical instrument exhibits certain similarities to the Chinese zither known as “Hu-Hu,” which likewise features a dual-string configuration. Nevertheless, significant distinctions may be observed in both their structural composition and the methodologies employed throughout performance.

The preservation and transmission of Isan music, namely Saw Isan, are firmly entrenched within the folk culture of the region. The musical heritage of Isan holds considerable importance among several traditions and contributes significantly to the overall cultural legacy of the region. The aforementioned findings align with the research conducted by Wajuppa Tossa (2012), which centered around a storytelling initiative in the Isan region. This initiative serves as an exemplification of the capacity of local storytelling to surpass geographical limitations and exert an impact on storytellers of foreign origins, facilitating the cultivation of cultural enrichment and promoting a greater comprehension and appreciation of many cultures.

In conclusion, Saw Isan and Isan music as a whole have significant importance within the local cultural context. The intimate connection between the Isan people and their past is reflected in the instruments, their craftsmanship, and their larger musical traditions. The reciprocal and transformational nature of cultural exchange is evident in both musical and storytelling traditions, contributing to the enrichment of local and global cultural landscapes. The cultural exchange serves to strengthen the relevance and longevity of these traditions by emphasizing the need for their preservation and transmission.

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