ANOTHER VIEW ON KHMU FLUTE SONGS IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Gisa Jähnichen[1]

Abstract

Khmu Flute Songs in Mainland Southeast Asia were already part of deeper investigations, which are reviewed here, yet some new points appeared since then. Updated re-readings need to be undertaken much more often in recent times. This paper is based on it and represents a small personal study of available materials won over time during manifold fieldwork experiences in Laos among Khmu people. It will shed light on the social construction of archaic societal structures and their transformation into the recent working units. Taking Khmu Flute Songs as an indicator for the presence of traditional power, these songs are re-investigated from a historical viewpoint. Special emphasis is also given to the individualization of knowledge and the unification of their streamed applications on another level. This small-scale study may contribute to the body of knowledge on musical practice as an indicator and result of social changes in the history of humankind.

Keywords

Khmu tot and pi, Southeast Asia, music production, songs, ethnomusicologists

INTRODUCTION

Khmu people, also named Kammu or Khkmuu or Khmou, were widely investigated from all sides, mainly in Laos and particularly the Khmu Yuan, the people Damrong Tayanin (1994) described in his North European exile. His writing from memory is an important piece to study from the viewpoint of a single person and a source of endless questions (Jenny, 2016). It is a typical "in-the-past-was-everything-better-piece" without being definite about what past and where it was meant to be right. This attitude, to make everything back in the late 19th or early 20th century being the norm, and all current issues being "abnormally modern," is more dangerous for the sustainability of a community than the wild collecting of anything "old." Recordings, that was already been said many times (Tessier, 2012), do not become more valid through age. Also, researchers have a problem with this insight. Field work is essential from any angle and not only through being personally in a remote area for a longer period of time, de facto collecting interesting appearances that can later be put on any stage. The wide acceptance of ethnomusicology in the1970s, which should not be forgotten, is the development of stage industries and the attraction of cultural festivals (Sapiro, 2016) for completely unrelated advertisements. Economists among the ethnomusicologists may have their own take on that and are often hidden under the name "popular music researchers." The cultural industry became a massive source of applicable demands and topics for cultural research, that was, facing the limited academic resources, a field of many outstanding projects and preservation efforts (Jayakody, 2008; Tessier, 2012; Sapiro, 2016). Economically successful communities are being praised in many regards, while those with economically unsuccessful outcomes regarding their "performance qualities" and "-willingness" are obviously less interesting. Khmu flute songs, as they

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are already part of CD albums produced in Oudomxay, are not to be brought on stage as they are part of a long history in Khmu communities and not made for any entertainment.

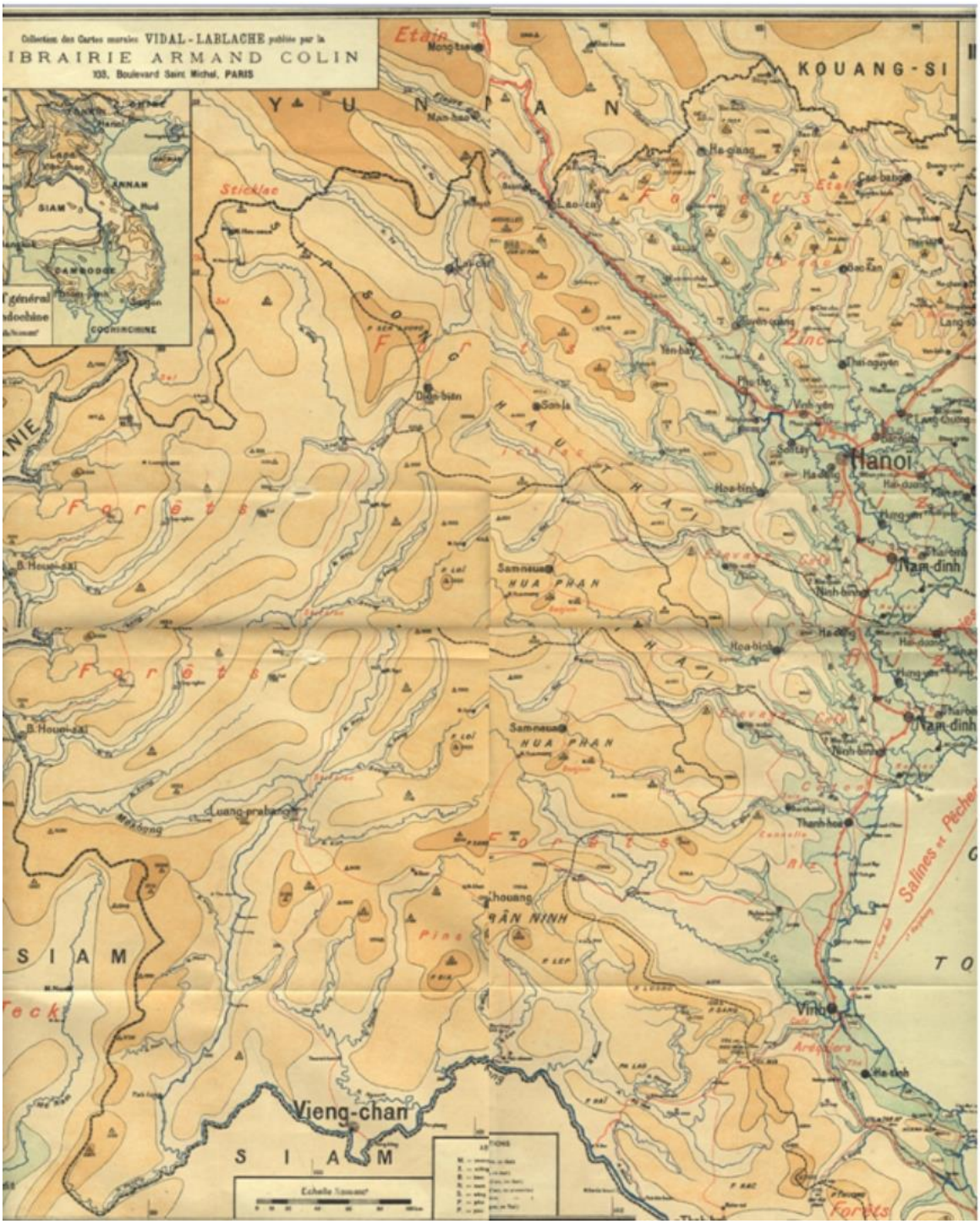

Figure 1a: This once folded map in the public domain since 1983 was taken from: LABLACHE publiée par la Librairie Armand Colin, 103, Boulevard Saint Michel, Paris, 1932. Copyright: Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication since 1999.

It shows the main territories of the Khmu living in Laos and Northern Vietnam. It was this openness that attracted researchers. The Khmu territories are reflected in general through maps, Figures 1a or 1b in the Southeast Asian mainland.

This static view on things is a bit outdated (Stolz, 2021; Evrard, 2007) in times of technology changes and an easier flow of information and people through various contemporary transport means.

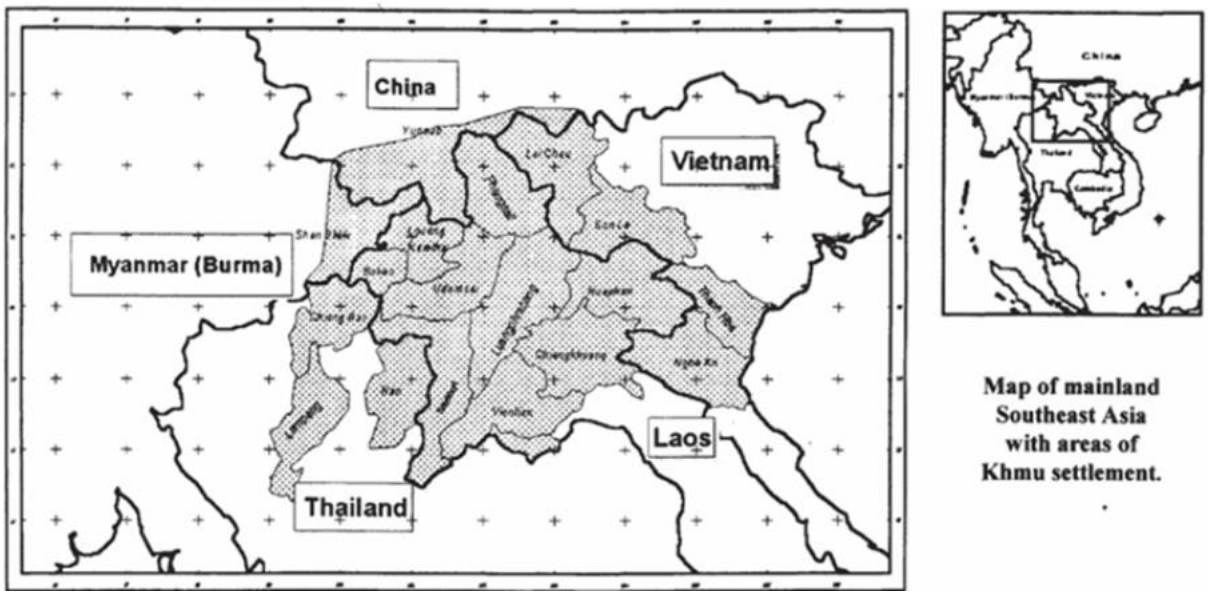

Figure 1b (map with provinces and Southeast Asian mainland in comparison): This less aged map of mainland Southeast Asia shows areas of Khmu settlements. Living areas of the Khmu in Vietnam do not reach the coastline, as indicated here through the inclusion of whole provinces. The misunderstanding of differences in basic rights among people according to their state involvement is probably a modern invention. (The picture is in the public domain since 2024, Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)

Ownership of Music Tools in Relatively Closed Communities

Among the Khmu Yuan, as Damrong Tayanin (1994, Figure 2; Jenny, 2016) describes, musical instruments belong to the village and are commonly accessible in the people's homes. This observation applies to most of the Khmu villages in Northern Laos and Vietnam, as they seem to be relatively closed. Not many communities can state this fact. The most significant musical instruments include the mouth organ with all its diverse parts, especially the small metal tongues that have to be inserted into the bamboo tubes; a long wooden drum; a side-blown horn and an end-blown horn; a kettle gong, which is in times of danger and war hidden in the forest because it is a costly item, a large knobbed, a smaller knobbed gong; and cymbals. Flutes, clarinets, and mouth harps belong to individuals and are not lent out to anyone.

Owned by the entire village

- Mouth organs of Lao origin with their inserted metal tongues
- Long drums made of wood
- Side-blown horns
- End-blown horns
- Kettle gongs
- Large knobbed gongs
- Small knobbed gongs

- Cymbals, sing
- Sets of new instruments taken over from other people as gifts or means to accompany modern songs (other people's songs played through new media)

Owned by an individual or a family

- Flutes/pi/tot
- Clarinets/pi/tot
- Mouth harps/mouth drums/toen

Figure 2: Ownership of musical instruments according to Damrong Tayanin (1994). Here printed with permission and put into order by the author (Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication).

The scheme shows clearly that wind instruments belong to individually owned musical instruments. They do not allow for community practices unless the players agree. It also shows in consequence that the players were following the advice of the elderly when having been convinced of the need to create an imperative event. They were factually owned by the community. This mutual ownership may, in this case, be at the core of community music. However, players do not represent the entire community. They cannot be representatives of their community or their region. Too many of them travel to many places in search of purchasing studies or in order to find a job or housing. People of one village do not stay there long enough to completely identify beyond their own will, simply because they are not convinced of the need to do so. That is something often forgotten in descriptions of the glorified past. The mouth harps, which might fall under the idiophones when following the von Hornbostel and Sachs (1914) scheme of sound production (a simple tongue that sounds of itself being amplified in pitch using the mouth as a modifiable cavity), are here very individually owned. They are only used for courting and exchange with close relatives. This is crucial when borrowing musical instruments, as players will not take the instrument back and use it after another person has used it already. These wind instruments can be the subject of arguments.

In similar contexts of the Southern Lao provinces, there are communities in Sekong that made strict differences in the age of those musical tools for many decades. New instruments were considered "strange" and not used for any serious ceremonies already in the 1960s. These tools were only played while having state parades or guests from other villages who needed to be entertained in a specific way (Jähnichen, 2016). What happens now with AI sound-generating tools is beyond any imagination.

Flute songs (also named pheng pi or toem tot) are songs played mainly during waiting times and day watches in the paddy fields by elderly women who transfer short sayings inserted into the flute song by their voices. The flute songs' insertions don't always follow the scheme of missing pitches, as those pitches could be easily produced, as experiments have shown. It is just a possibility to put voices in. Over time, it became a specialty of carefully playing elderly women to use flute songs to entertain and to teach at the same time (Jähnichen, 2011). Uay Phan hardly remembered the periods of time when she was willing to play the Khmu flute, which she may have called pi or tot. The girl I videorecorded in 1984 with the help of the former Music Institute in Hanoi, and this girl stayed without a name in later documents, was briefed not to play any text-relevant songs. Her insertions were short and not understandable even by language-knowers of her own community. What united her playing with her followers was the relative length of the instrument. It is easy to recognize that the finger holes are far from the blowing hole positioned. The length of the flute is to let the standing air column sound lower and not to need much air, as if singing in the tube. She also shows the same posture as Uay Phan

in Figure 3a and practiced this playing in her elder years. Here she only imitated the playing. While imitating, she additionally covered her mouth. This was not due to a differentiated understanding of the sung insertions, but the habit of her not showing her mouth. The mouth covering will possibly change or decline entirely when sitting in front of any girls to be taught.

Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c: Uay Phan (left figure, 3a) and Quang Thi Vinh (middle figure, 3b) each performing a flute song. The hand position implies that Quang Thi Vinh adopted playing techniques of the Vietnamese sáo trúc after introducing the Western sáo ngang (traverse flute). Uay Phan plays the flute in a way that allows her to rest the upper part of the flute on her shoulder while singing. The same as the Khmu girl recorded on video (right figure, 3c) by myself at the end of November 1984 in Moc Chau, Vietnam. (Copyright by the author: Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)

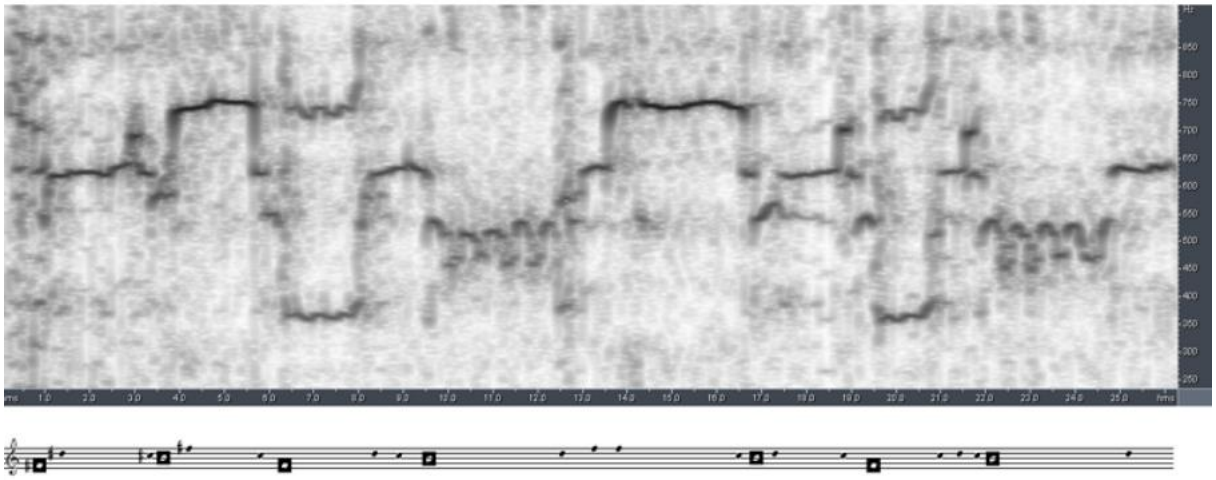

Figure 4: The flute song section shown in this figure is with reduced speed taken from recording ATML601. Flute and voice are clearly distinguishable in a spectrogram generated through AdobeAudio (CoolEditPro). The notation below the spectrogram marks the vocal insertions. (All depictions printed with permission. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)

The Loss of Power

I wrote some time ago:

> …a shaman, who needs a few days of preparation, chicken offerings and complicated rituals, cannot win against the common television knowledge of Aspirin or Panadol. Even agrarian and educational expertise can be quickly substituted by television magazines and serials from all over the world. The young generation growing up in these times of radical changes is convinced about the universality of cultural knowledge. An Australian farmer knows better than the grandfather which fertilizer fits to the soil and a French fashion designer knows better than grandmother how to dress up attractively. As a result, long-held differentiated gender roles in the village are converted to the global shallowness of information didactics. These didactics point toward global consumer behaviour. How do flute song playing women teach, perform, and entertain young girls? (Jähnichen, 2011: 144–145)

With the loss of their social position gained through their superior knowledge of specific proceedings, these women have lost a big part of their power in the village. Hence, they give up playing and teaching their daughters and relatives. Alternatives are not available, although they might be possible in terms of turning general knowledge control through elder people into knowledge of locally rooted specialties that cannot be provided by any other means. This is the point where ethnomusicologists may see a chance to turn the interest of the elderly toward stage performances in front of anonymous crowds, where the best rows are often blocked for "state officers" and random guests. Therefore, the art of constructing such a complex, beautifully interwoven melodic music using flute and voice is naturally dying out, simply by not attending to it anymore. I continued,

> "Although we can still listen to it facilitated by modern media, the meaning of the music and especially the meaning of its performers will not return" (Jähnichen, 2011: 145).

That was written in the mood of the 2010s. It might not be up to ethnomusicologists to decide about regrets or encouragements, although as is often experienced, this kind of regretting among ethnomusicologists is widely seen (Craig & Dubois, 2010). Multiple articles in this regard operate with dying cultural values as a source of needing themselves to come for rescue (Figures 3a, 3b, 4, and 5). Actually, that might be the point of becoming ethnomusicologists, who are obviously only there to put up show elements for the sake of industrial marketing. And in that the blocked rows' occupiers might be interested in. This thought is new and questions the usefulness of work in general. It would be too short-sighted, if ethnomusicologists really did not do any other things like carefully analyzing and generously uplifting those communities' values.

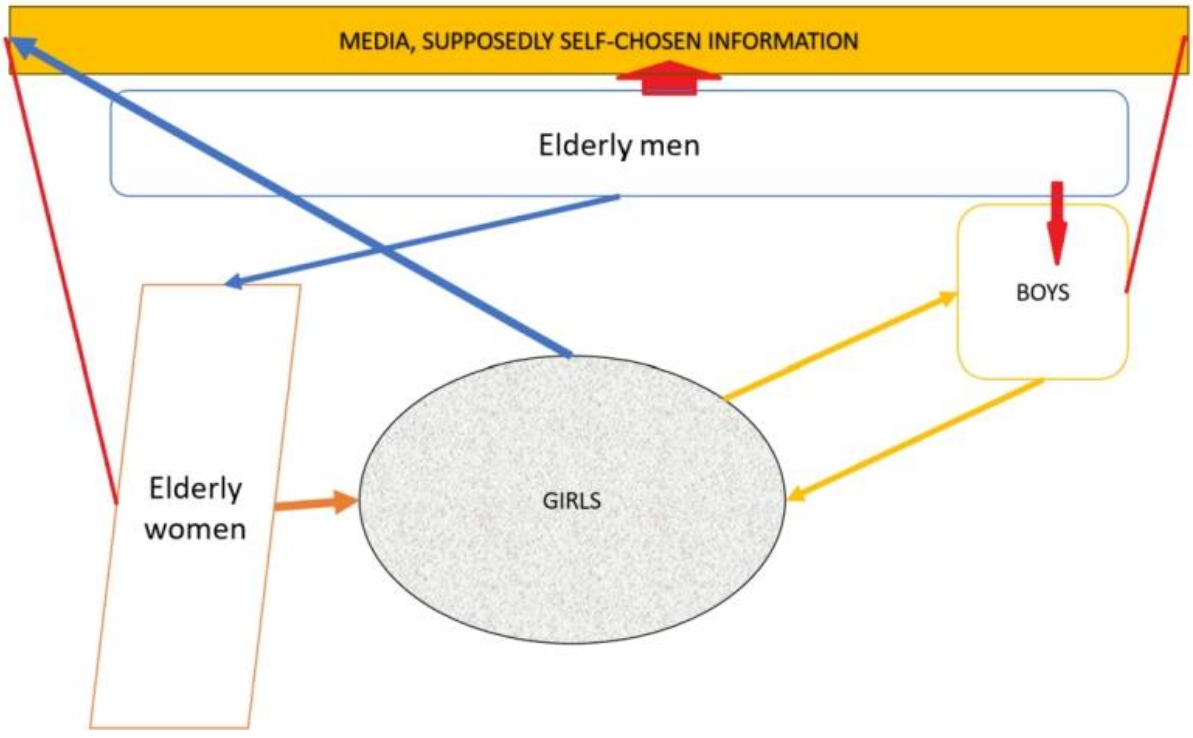

Figure 5: This scheme shows the current conflict of steady comparison in the transmission of cultural experience. (Scheme by the author, Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)

Out of recordings that were recorded by myself in Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand as well as in some accessible collections with sufficient descriptions, 76 % were vocal expressions or performances of which approximately a half was accompanied by a six-, seven-, or eight-foot mouth organ (Jähnichen, 2013). More about mouth organs can be found in various local articles

written in English, Lao, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, and Burmese. Out of the named songs, two songs were accompanied by a larger ensemble, one traditional with mouth organ, long conical drum, a percussive wooden pole, and small cymbals, and one modernized ensemble with mouth organ, a self-made plucked spike lute, and a guitar. For more data, the Archives of Traditional Music in Laos (ATML) at the National Library of Laos can be consulted. The loss of power is real, yet temporary. Elderly women will still be held in high regard (Jayakody, 2008), and they will be asked for their help and opinion, as the most experienced in at least a while, when the use of advanced technological tools will be a rather common issue. All these technological devices or possibilities also grow out of their narrowness and fear-mongering appearance. It will be possibly normal to communicate via the internet and to let hard-working monotonic issues be done by AI machines.

What Can Be Added after Re-examining Previous Studies

Being a Khmu, the respective overarching society changed rapidly. Local settlements no longer the main role as well as language relationships. The often-quoted 'past' is simply not 'the past' anymore. The "past" that appears as 'the olden days' are glorified moments of sudden insights (Goudineau & Bouté, 2022). Precise studies avoid generalizations in this regard. Being a Khmu is again reduced to language knowledge, not without being a contradictory issue, as many items are only known by hearsay.

The young generation always exists in each time period. Luckily. Its impact might get smaller. Unluckily, complaints of the lack of any younger generation's interest are actually complaints about one's own insufficient studies and offers to learn from the elderly.

For example, telescope clarinet playing boys try to play flute songs, changing the meaning for all involved persons. They make fun of the elderly women and of the learning girls, young boys are as arrogant as they appear in each time period before. There is no difference in eras.

"Nowaday" is in this regard "everyday." Youngsters may need that overconfidence in order to find their place in a differently abled and gendered society. The whole family construction does not apply in the same way as before. The transformation of all attributes over time will change their personalities and make everyone compatible with current needs, whether it happens in a controlled way or not. It is not necessary to regret the decline of 'old musical wisdom.' Although many things can be rescued thanks to advanced levels of technological involvement, yet the use of wisdom is strongly limited through permanently changing conditions.

Power structures will surely re-establish due to the higher social competence of the elderly. The eldest generation is making a technological impact less dominant or not reaching out into all domains of anyone's personal life. The mastering of new tools is probably far faster than thought. Elderly women can make use of their experiences while learning to distinguish good from bad news, creative adaptations from re-inventions they have known already for a longer time, or the abuse of young scholarly works for the sake of power manipulations in decisive circles of hiring and firing that come through the use of technologically advanced tools, when these tools miss out a guiding instance like an editor, a librarian, or any governmental body. The elderly will still keep learning soon that these tools will be needed everywhere.

Teaching in a gendered way will be framed by globally accepted patterns, which might include religious differences as justifications (Stolz, 2021). That may include changing nationalities or other wars against other beings with varying orientations.

What Can Be Learned from That? – Conclusion

The performer's ideas are tremendously significant. They are not just coming from a nameless informant. It is not simply a person of a 'tribe,' representing the 'tribe's take on specific things,' (Goudineau & Bouté, 2022) but a personality that deserves the same rights as any observer. Those performers are the people of interest in ethnographic studies. They have to be taken seriously and at least integrated into reference lists. Using them in acknowledgments is fine, but a bit too reduced. Most of the offered ideas stem from their joint efforts. So, a mention of the interview would always be in place. The tools of transmission such as TV, broadcasting on radio, or the use of social media on smartphones contribute to the general shallowness just temporarily. Very quickly, people will learn to distinguish between different sources. In the future, there will be no need for filters and no need for controlling instances such as library boards or internet police at all. People, the former folk and their descendants, will quickly find out by themselves from where and how facts are getting into the worldwide web. The performers of any action, may it be music, dance, or visual arts, have to trust in the upcoming technology. That might also be a reason for researchers to quickly adopt these tools, derived from the upcoming technology. People will drive the further development of tools by testing their use. They will definitely be a part of the history with them. Researchers are not merely busy with reflecting and predicting using the most advanced technology already.

On the other hand, it should become clearer than ever that the current powers of necessary shallowness cannot replace the limited power of self-produced expressions based on local experiences. This power is mainly a kind of self-empowering strength and has nothing to do with self-centered thinking. Self-centered shaming is often applied to supposedly biased expressions of young scholars. Yet, it is clear that these younger scholars do more good than bad with their bias. Local experiences are much longer-lasting than the authority of any mobile device instruction, given by a competent person who is known from face-to-face. These place-bound facts and assurances support the belief that inborn qualities play a role in competencies, which is a typical fallacy. That also signals that online instructions have to be of higher quality. Diversity as wished for is established on another level than merely on language distinctions. At the moment, many ethnic schemes are still only based on language use, as this reduction seems appropriate in many regards. However, that is not nearly sufficient as well as established "folk"-ideas that only apply to people in clearly not only geographically different societies, which were already obsolete through economic changes and a step-by-step integration into the national state industrialization. The folk is not the folk of an undefined glorified past where "the folk" could not write or read or conceptualize any kind of music or dance as being ritually rooted, at least not in that rural, oral, undefined shape. The "folk," as being nominally glorified, is probably in power yet without the attitude of being something better, deserving high-class specialties. When talking about Khmu, which were also often called Kammu, at least in Laos (Tayanin, 1994), who live in a number of states with different systems and various overarching structures, this discrepancy is covered by an anonymous culturalism that has to be deeply understood and dismantled through serious studies of all details, also details regarding some non-musical appearances without getting to the typical fallacy to take a community familiarity or language proficiency for representativeness or proof of insider knowledge. The latest case of Khmu flute songs shows the rapid decline of local wisdom and representativeness.

That might all lead to stop neocolonial descriptions, such as not including informants in the reference lists or mentioning them simply by name and their relationships to the object in focus,

as elaborated earlier (Jähnichen, 2016) and to start true analyses through the repertoire of the humanities' methods, of which sharp and unavoidably always subjectively biased observations are one central part. The denial of subjectivity is in no case helpful, as already Bourdieu (1993) commented in his *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, carefully edited by Randal Johnson. It takes away the responsibilities and the possibilities to learn of being an individual who is at least responsible for oneself and one's own doings.

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