

REVIEWING THE LAO KHAEN IN CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING

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Abstract

A workshop that I attended concluded that intangible heritage can only be sustained if people care more for their past. Traditional supplementary art has to help sustain musical items. So, I came to narrate the story of the Lao Khaen, a free reed musical instrument that is dispersed over a large territory in Southeast Asia. I also have to narrate the whole story behind the technicalities and the construction of the musical instrument. It is hard to tell things to kids and people who don't know anything about it yet. But I tried and wrote a short story that can be read and easily distributed. The narration model was first picked up by my mentor Kongdeuane Nettavong, who wrote some small books to propagate awareness, for example, about environmental issues in Laos. I learned from her how to put things into words that I could observe in daily practice. This short review essay, which also introduces inspiring literature, is about the story of telling common knowledge regarding this special reed instrument. I can also make the different components visible that are needed to compose such a story. For this reason, I go a step away from a primary text analysis. As a result, this can stimulate a discussion on methods and integrated art forms.

Keywords

Lao cultures, khaen, narrations, art forms, sutsanen

THE KHAEN MUSIC OF THE LAO PEOPLE

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) has a rich history of arts, culture, and traditions that have been preserved since the beginning of civilization for thousands of years, which is not different from the Lao as an ethnic group. Historically, the Lao people communicated orally to pass down techniques and wisdom from generation to generation (Hongkat, 2011). Before writing became common, these stories were usually told orally passed down from parents to children until the era of writing, expressed in notes on the cliffs, cave walls, temples, sila stones, palm leaves, and later on paper. The records of historical traces were written in literary forms that have been handed down in various ways to the Lao people. However, khaen music does not have a specific written system of notation or detailed written records (Morton, 1976; Miller, 1985). The history of the khaen, a traditional Lao musical instrument, is often described in literature intended to preserve its origin. This history is deeply rooted in the experiences of the Lao people across Asia, who have embraced it as a fundamental aspect of their culture.

Many questions arise regarding the khaen's origins: Where did the khaen come from? Who produced the khaen? According to the story *Lay khaen: From the Sound of Koravik or Koravek*, the khaen is believed to have originated from a bird known for its most melodious sound in that area (as the legend says). In addition, numerous traditional Lao writings on Bai Lan and Lan Gom, such as Thao Kamkadam, Khamphaphinoy mokhaen, Khampha pitonkhau, 4 ay nongmahat-sachan, Khaen khong thao Kampha, and Khampha mo khaen. These stories can be read in the book, *Stories about Khaen daen champa and Mon sa ne sieng khaen phaen din koet*, writte by Kongdeuane Nettavong (2016 – 2018).

Today, the khaen is considered a traditional musical instrument of the Lao people, maintaining its unique characteristics across different regions. In the past as well as in the present, the khaen still has its uniqueness as a musical instrument that shows special characteristics among other types of musical instruments. It harmonizes with all kinds of sounds, the languages of minorities, such as Khmu and Hmong, and numerous Lao communities from the South who moved there. The khaen music has been developed over generations and is integral to all religious rituals and local customs and traditions of villagers, reflecting a belief that khaen serves as a sacred object capable of communicating with spirits

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invisible to the human eye. Therefore, the khaen, apart from being a musical instrument used to play various songs or being blown for healing ceremonies, is also a tool used to worship the deities and divines in the main district.

All this has shown the benefits and importance of the khaen. The khaen is related to the way of Lao life, from the north to the south, in faraway places as the Lao people inhabited them. Some of the items are even named Lao. This also applies to the Lao khaen.

THE KHAEN'S FEATURES

The khaen is a kind of instrument that uses the wind through the mouth, represented through a wooden wind chest, to make a sound. It is crafted from bamboo and blackwood of various sizes. Both parts are assembled into pairs to create a khaen with a specific wind chamber. In the khaen, tongues, reeds are used to make differently pitched sounds. Traditionally, these reeds are made of metal, brass, copper, silver, gold, or a combination of materials. Nowadays, khaens are often made using different metal coins as a basic material for the tongues. The sound of the khaen is made by blowing air through a single hole in the wind chamber, which is then guided to the reeds enclosed within a closed pipe after the closing of fingers and then it makes the sound of that tongue inserted into the reed. It is absolutely different from any flute, as flutes make produce sound through the highest hole left open by the player's fingers. At least this is the simple understanding of flutes among people in that area.

Generally, the khaen is a musical instrument with a deep and, at times, sharp sound. It can be played alone or in pairs, provided both instruments are crafted by the same khaen-maker. It is absolutely crucial to tune the khaen right at the beginning into a specific mood, as the instrument should be enabled to join other musical instruments. At least in the last 50 years, this was an important feature. Old pictures from the early 20th century show many khaen players who did not sound harmonized together (Jaehnichen, 2017).

In the Lao language, khaen has many meanings:

- (1) It can mean **poor or lacking**.
- (2) It also refers to a type of **type of hardwood tree**.
- (3) In Northern Laos: khaen nae translates to khai nae, which means **declare or admit**.

The range of abilities might be the origin of the people playing the instrument.



Figure 1: Book covers in which some of the khaen legends are told (Nettavong, 2016-2018). Re-printed with permission).

The books with *Khaen stories* (Chanthasone, 2016, Kongdeuane Nettavong 2016-2018, Jähnichen 2017) contain a legend about a king who visited the forest. I am going to tell this story as it is often done in public: When he was resting, he heard the sound of the birds singing, both fun and fear-bearing, and he also heard the special song of some birds. When the king heard it, he felt sad and light-hearted; it was like the sound of music. After he returned to the palace, he still thought about the sound of the birds' singing all the time. Then he told the servants to go to that forest once to listen to the sound of the birds singing, and he asked people to make a musical instrument that could mimic the sound of the bird. One person volunteered to make this musical instrument.

First, he cut three pairs of bamboo sticks (a 3-foot khaen) and drilled them to make hollow chambers. When the King heard the sound, he nodded and said that it was still an incorrect sound.

Second, the maker said, “I can do it better,” but the king said that it is still not correct.

Third, the maker tried to produce it bigger by using seven pairs of reeds (a 7-foot khaen); when he played this instrument, it produced a sound akin to a lizard’s singing, but the king said that it was not yet full enough. The maker then took a stick and added one more pair, transforming it into an 8-foot khaen, and played it. The sound came out and connected like a vine; when the king heard the sound, he was very happy. Then he uttered, “It’s true.” It is the origin of the word “khaen thae laey,” which eventually evolved into the name “khaen, khaen, khaen” as we know it today.

This short story shows that it was likely told during the first half of the 20th century, as earlier periods didn’t recognize the 8-foot khaen.

THE HERITAGE STORY

The government of the Lao PDR, along with the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, has proposed the Lao people’s khaen chants for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list. One can have different opinions about cultural heritage and some reasonings from specific communities. The community sees the achievement of being listed as such always as a source of future income. If there are any disputes, it is most often the income source in question. Therefore, people are very keen to get onto this list in order to apply later on for international recognition. On the one hand, it is wonderful that UNESCO is recognized as an international institution capable of such acknowledgments; on the other hand, potential disappointments exist. Recognition by UNESCO may not always be sustainable or hold the same significance for everyone. In December 2017, the khaen repertoire, deeply rooted in Lao culture, was approved by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In 2018, the Lao PDR, as well as the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, celebrated this honor with a ceremony recognizing khaen music, which had been designated by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In the parade, which was fully attended by senior officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Sonesai Siphandone and other nationally high-ranking people such as Prof. Dr. Bosengkham Vongdala, Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism; his deputy ministers; heads and deputies of departments; leaders from other provinces across the country; organizations; staff; performing artistes; youth; students; and residents of Vientiane from all ethnic groups.

The procession of Lao people started at the memorial courtyard of King Fa Ngum’s monument, who united Laos as the kingdom of Lanxang in the distant past. This departure point was chosen based on diverse connections to the history of Laos that was already mentioned.

At an appropriate moment, a mourning ceremony was performed, accompanied by the music of the khaen played by the art corps. Then the parade moved to the memorial of the famous warrior of the Red Star in the courtyard of the stupa That Luang in Vientiane. This is again symbolic and includes all the significant changes during khaen’s playing over the decades. Spirituality can be observed through the specific kind of connections between Buddhism and legal power, along with recent historical events in the 20th century. This is also shown in the following steps: After that, the parade moved to the museum of Kaysone Phomvihane, who was a past president of Laos. He anecdotally liked to play the khaen (khaen music in the new Sinxay era and had to be kept alive) as it was an example of mobilizing the youth to preserve the khaen and the sound of the khaen to sustain the traditions. The parade was designed for everyone to enjoy. In the evening of the same day, a performance showcasing khaen music at the cultural hall featured more recent repertoire than early works.

ONE SPECIAL ITEM FOR KHAEN: LAY SUTSANEN

One specific melodic shape is the **lay sutsanen**, which refers to the basic sound produced by the canes. This melody is typically one of the first learned by those who play the khaen and can be applied in various entertainment contexts, as well as in pure instrumental music.

The Lao people’s use of lay sutsanen includes the following song categories: lam Siphandon, lam Khonsavan, lam Banxok, lam Phuthai, lam Tangvay, lam Salavan, lam Mahasay, and some other

kinds of lam. These melodic shapes were recorded in the Archives of Traditional Music in Laos (ATML) some time ago and preserved in reports as transcripts.

There are a total of 32 items named lay sutsanen in the collections of ATML, which are mostly used in Laos from north to south. Some of these melodies are shown in books represented in Figure 1. While all the songs are mainly dedicated to the text, for example, in lam Siphandon, which describes the beauty and daily activities on the 4000 islands of the Mekong river, the song about Salavan highlights the features of Salavan province. In this context, the song-texts serve merely as a medium for voice expression, emphasizing the song's various structures, best represented by the accompanying khaen. Therefore, the khaen plays a significant role in the melodic shape of lay sutsanen.

ລາມຂອນສະວັນ Lam khonsavan ATML 00456

♩ = 105

lam

khen

kachappi

sing

kong hang

Figure 2: An excerpt of the beginning of the transcription of piece ATML00456, *Lam khonsavan*. There, accompanying instruments include singing (= lam), khen (= Mundorgel), kachappi (local lute), sing (= small-sized cymbals), and kong hang (= one-headed long drum). This transcription was conducted by Gisa Jaehnichen and is shared by courtesy.

♩ = 90

Figure 3: This is an excerpt of the beginning of the transcription of piece ATML00459, *Lam thangvay*. The accompanying instruments include singing (= lam), khen (= Mundorgel), kachappi (local lute), sing (= small-sized cymbals), and kong hang (= one-headed long drum). This transcription was conducted by Gisa Jaehnichen and is shared by courtesy.

FINAL REMARKS

The khaen can be described as a traditional Lao musical instrument made of hei-wood or kasen-wood, characterized by long and short tubes tied together in an ascending way. The tongues of the khaen are considered the most important components, as they are inserted into the wind chamber and are not visible from the outside.

The sound of the khaen is labeled as a sound that creates a feeling of excitement; there are fun, sad moods according to the various songs of the repertoire used for various occasions.

The National Library of Laos has contributed to this process by arranging a room to exhibit some prototypes of the khaen, along with preserved recordings of traditional music heritage produced shortly before the program's implementation and to date. Therefore, the Lao people recognize that the history of the 8-foot khaen is relatively short, especially compared to that of large brass gongs or drums, which were widely discovered and used in Southeast Asia before national states began to develop.

Nowadays, the khaen music, which includes solo pieces, accompanied songs, and group performances, has spread widely through many channels. It is present not only in every village, but also within communities throughout the country and beyond. The khaen music holds a significant importance for the people of Laos, playing a vital role in the practice of community traditions, rituals, and festivals. While other types of music may be introduced, they often fail to gain special attention

paid by the community. It remains to be investigated what factors influence people's receptivity to musical practices and how this impacts their musical behaviour.

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ABSTRACT IN LAO LANGUAGE

ກອງປະຊຸມທີ່ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າເຂົ້າຮ່ວມສະຫຼຸບໄດ້ວ່າ ມໍລະດົກທີ່ເປັນນາມມະທຳສາມາດຍືນຍົງໄດ້ ຖ້າຫາກວ່າປະຊາຊົນໃນເມື່ອກ່ອນໄດ້ເອົາໃຈໃສ່ປົກປັກຮັກສາໃຫ້ຫຼາຍຂຶ້ນ. ການເສີມສ້າງສິລະປະດັ່ງເດີມແມ່ນເພື່ອຊ່ວຍປົກປັກຮັກສາມໍລະດົກທາງດ້ານດົນຕີພື້ນເມືອງໃຫ້ຍືນຍົງ ສະນັ້ນ, ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າຈຶ່ງໄດ້ມາເລົ່າເລື່ອງກ່ຽວກັບເຄື່ອງດົນຕີ “ແຄນລາວ”, ເປັນເຄື່ອງດົນຕີທີ່ເຮັດດ້ວຍໄມ້ອີ່ ທີ່ແຜ່ກະຈາຍຢູ່ໃນດິນແດນອັນກວ້າງໃຫຍ່ໃນອາຊີຕາເວັນອອກສຽງໃຕ້. ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າໄດ້ເລົ່າຂັ້ນຕອນທາງດ້ານເຕັກນິກ ແລະ ການຜະລິດເຄື່ອງດົນຕີ “ແຄນ”. ການເລົ່າຂັ້ນຕອນຕ່າງໆໃຫ້ຄົນໜຸ່ມນ້ອຍ ແລະ ຜູ້ທີ່ຍັງບໍ່ຮູ້ກ່ຽວກັບແຄນ ມັນອາດຈະຟັງຍາກ ແລະ ສົບສົນ, ແຕ່ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າໄດ້ພະຍາຍາມຂຽນບົດຄວາມສັ້ນໆທີ່ທ່ານສາມາດອ່ານ ແລະ ໃຈ້ແຍກໄດ້ງ່າຍ. ເນື້ອໃນການບັນຍາຍໄດ້ຄັດເລືອກ ແລະ ໄດ້ຮັບການປຶກສາຈາກທ່ານນາງ ກົງເດືອນ ເນັດຕະວົງ, ຜູ້ທີ່ຂຽນປຶ້ມນ້ອຍໆຈຳນວນໜຶ່ງ ເພື່ອເຜີຍແຜ່ໃຫ້ແກ່ມວນຊົນໄດ້ຮັບຮູ້, ຕົວຢ່າງ, ບັນຫາກ່ຽວກັບສິ່ງແວດລ້ອມຕ່າງໆໃນລາວ. ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າສັງເກດເຫັນ ແລະ ໄດ້ຮຽນຮູ້ກ່ຽວກັບການປະຕິບັດວຽກງານປະຈຳວັນ ແລະ ວິທີການເລົ່າເລື່ອງຕ່າງໆຂອງລາວ. ບົດຄວາມສັ້ນໆເຫຼົ່ານີ້ເປັນເລື່ອງເລົ່າທີ່ໜ້າສົນໃຈ ໂດຍສະເພາະເຄື່ອງດົນຕີທີ່ມີລືນ. ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າ ຍັງໄດ້ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນອົງປະກອບຕ່າງໆທີ່ແຕກຕ່າງກັນໃນເລື່ອງນັ້ນ. ດ້ວຍເຫດຜົນດັ່ງກ່າວ, ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າຈຶ່ງໄດ້ວິເຄາະໄປຕາມຂັ້ນຕອນທຳອິດ. ດັ່ງນັ້ນ, ສິ່ງເຫຼົ່ານີ້ສາມາດກະຕຸກຊຸກຢູ່ໃຫ້ສົນທະນາ ກ່ຽວກັບວິທີການ ແລະ ຮູບແບບສິລະປະ ປະສົມປະສານກັນ.