

REVIEWING THE TELESCOPE CLARINET OF NORTHERN LAOS

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Abstract

The telescope clarinet that can be found in some places of Northern Laos is a very rare musical instrument and nearly not played anymore. But the musical instrument was still available at the beginning of this century. This short paper will describe the construction and the former use of it in the communities of that area. In result, some difficulties in musical understanding of the area's musical heritage can be explained and discussed. Another point is the embedding of the musical instrument into the entire communal context. Research questions are mainly whether the hierarchies found through observation are pretended or real.

Keywords

Lao cultures, reed instruments, telescope clarinets, Khmu people, contextual embedding

INTRODUCTION

The telescope clarinet that can be found in some places of Northern Laos is a very rare musical instrument. It is nearly not played anymore. But the musical instrument was still available at the beginning of this century. It was available but was always in need of a player with specialised skills. The categorisation term 'specialised skills' becomes seemingly more and more important. The clarinet was a complicated sound tool that was owned individually since the beginning of the 19th century. This short paper will describe contextually the construction and the former use of it in the communities of that area and their current problems in caring for diversity of musical instruments. In result, some difficulties in musical understanding of the area's musical heritage can be explained and discussed. Another point is the embedding of the musical instrument into the entire communal context. Research questions are mainly whether the hierarchies found through observation are pretended or real. To find out these facts, a detailed report on the connected fieldwork can help. It is a fieldwork inside a larger fieldwork that led to the findings. Recordings are available in Vientiane's National Library and at the Berlin Phonogram Archive. Unfortunately, staged performances all play with pretended ideals as far as it was expressed by the musicians.

FEATURES OF THE INSTRUMENT

Considering the long time span between events at the national and global levels such as the further transformation of social power, technological developments, and the last major pandemic, it is surprising to see that the hierarchies of beauty in instrumental music remained largely unchanged in remote villages. In 2004, I noted (Jähnichen, 2004: paragraph above drawings 106 and 107):

A distinction must be made between two types of tongue cutting, which are: the direction of blowing is open at the bottom, and the cut is opposite to the direction of blowing, which is open at the top. The latter allows tapping of the tongue with the lips and thus enables pitch manipulations during playing. Regarding the tongue, which is open at the bottom, their mode of action can only be caused with the help of additional devices, such as bindings or underlays.

Interestingly, the possibility that the cut can show in any direction makes it obvious that the tongue and its length or the applied method of its cutting are more important to the pitch and sound than the fingerholes or the measurements from the blowing hole to the first fingerhole as is the case with flutes. However, a clarinet is a hybrid insofar as reed and flute have their part in its construction. The

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fingerholes are also somewhat important in their order and their ability to have an impact on tone structures such as the often observed playing of pitch scales.

There were encountered closed clarinets without fingerholes among people in the American Amazon Region (Jähnichen, 2004: Fig. 106, left; Freire Dourado and Jähnichen, 2024; Collaer & Elsner 1983) a while ago. They were used by coordinated groups of several players during an evening entertainment, each of whom played only one tone. The exact pitch and strength of the sound can be determined by the lacing or by lip pressure on the tongue, which can be regulated.

Other open clarinets without fingerholes are the mangtong (Jähnichen, 2004: Fig. 106, right) of the Iu-Mien and Hmong Deng (Miao Hong, the 'Red' Miao) in southern China, where these people are called nationalities, ethnic groups, or simply minorities. The latter is surprising insofar as those people are not a minority when they are visited in their villages. In their houses and surrounding the gardens, they are definitely a majority, and their understanding of rights applies. One should always be aware of these rights. This is where a small clarinet with a reed cut in the septum of a larger bamboo tube could be found. While the player enters the small tube that he holds in his right hand and blows vigorously into it, he moves with his other hand the large tube up and down to create different pitches. The mangtong exists in four different sizes, which were once exhibited in a place in Southern China in the 1980s (Liu Xiangkun & Jähnichen, 2024) and were used in pairs for the entertainment of men and women. In current writings, the mangtong appears as an additional attribute of a Miao musical instrument formation for competitions that appear rather entertaining than traditionally grown of similarly sounding lushengs (queijs) with some specific repertoire in which the mangtong is involved:

The mangtong lusheng has a large repertoire, among them are the tunes used for sacrificing, including remembrance of the ancestors, invitation and parting. The tunes used for funerals include passing by, entrance into heaven, sadness, farewell, comforting those left behind and parting with the deceased. (Project description of 628-II-129, 2008).

This view may underline the competitive character of musical ensemble playing as being used to identify extraordinary stage musicians in the province of Guizhou and other central Chinese provinces. The longest mangtong was to reach up to 1.60 m in length and had to be set down on the floor while playing. In this case, the player moves the small tube in the septum, the oscillation section of the tongue, and through this method they can affect the melody by changing pitches.

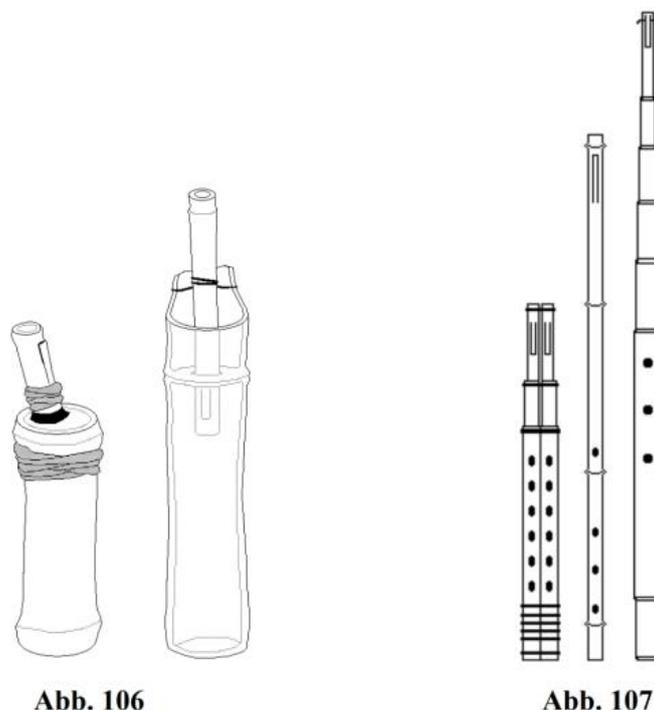


Figure 1: Various clarinets as presented in Jähnichen 2004. Drawing by the author.

The former presence of clarinets in Oceania (Fischer, 1986), which were mainly played for entertainment, was confined to a relatively small area in Micronesia and Polynesia. Here, in each case, the tongues were generally cut open at the top in opposite directions to the blowing direction (Figure 107, middle). The clarinets have three or four fingerholes, each at the front, and some specimens from two or more interlocking tubes can be pushed together like a telescope and thus change their tuning.

The same applies to the clarinets of some Mon Khmer peoples of Mainland Southeast Asia. They can consist of up to 7 parts, like those of the Khmu (Abb. 107 of Jähnichen, 2004, right). The finger holes are mounted on the second last part and the largest in diameter. A hair or a flattened straw is used on the one hand to lift off the tongue, which is open at the bottom, and on the other hand for tuning, and is left there during the playing.

EMBEDDED ANALYSIS

The clarinet played here in the photo (Figures 2a and 2b), which was taken by an unknown assistant of Sivilyay Sopha for the ATML, has only two parts. The stripe to be used for manipulating the tuning is still visible. The older one with more parts is not played anymore. These instruments were extinct at the time of recording. We could see this type of instrument in Bolikhamsay (Figure 3), a province slightly more to the South, where people were relocated among Khmu people from the densely populated North (Lindell, 1998; Jähnichen, 2011). Yet, there was no player alive and available. This leads to the assumption that the playing of this instrument is not practised as it was not played in areas that are not connected to the electric power network of the area.



Figures 2a (left) and 2b (right): Tha [m.58] plays ‘pi paoha phusao’ (Searching for a girl) on 28 August 2000 at Lak 8, Luang Prabang (recorded by Sivilyay Sopha, archived by Thongbang Homsombat, confirmed by Gisa Jähnichen, Photo by courtesy of ATML).

If electric power would have been installed and used, the entire village would have already switched to passive music consumption, and music cassettes would circulate with audio and/or video recordings as observed several times during fieldwork in remote areas. The distribution and existence of music cassettes and CDs were rather manageable and just occasionally at the beginning of the 21st century. However, practical observations and reports often do not match each other.

There is an analysis of the playing and the recording made on the same day and carrying the Code Number 602 of the 16th ATML-sound collection made in the area of Luang Prabang.

techniques, which is tremendously important as it shows that both cultural centres were interwoven at one point in history.

Further, it also comes with the observation that the free reed pi was played in a similar way and that the instrument had rather a reputation as a toy. The free reed pi of the Hmong, Lao, and the Khmu was possible only when played by very young boys who could not yet operate a queij or khaen. It was to stimulate their sense of melodic variations. Unfortunately, there are only few recordings, yet all recordings show this circling around easily produced and straight unembellished pitches, like here the upper octave of the D flat with a tendency to go higher and the D flat as the third tone in the upper row (if translated into absolute pitches). The first G flat is produced without strong blowing and is a point from where the melodies start. European-trained ears may recognise a kind of tonal centre. It may have been rightly chosen as a melody departure as it was also confirmed through other findings in Southern China and shows some late tuning standards (Liu Xiangkun & Jähnichen, 2024). Another possibility is the imitation of the previous recording made on a flute called tot Khmu, which had added a voice at some places. The recording was a toem tot Khmu (toem is a specific free metric and lyric genre with many couplets, which was modified according to different language particles). This recording was transcribed earlier (Jähnichen, 2011: 142). The voice added there made up for the rather less stable pitches in this context as it was the vibrating part of the melodic line and not the missing pitch in a technically possible scale. A similar idea might be the upper tonal centre that could only be reached through a very strong blowing. Considering the necessity of circular breathing, this kind of blowing becomes rather complex and hard to learn. After all efforts, playing a khaen or queij was much easier.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The gender and age aspects (Warner Schaie & Abeles, 2008) are present as the toem tots were all executed by elderly women, while the pi-playing was a business of the young boys. Some elderly, former young boys, and now experienced men may have thought of playing better than a female toem tot on the pi Khmu, which was represented on this telescope clarinet. But this is still an unproven issue and needs further investigation. It can be an individual ex- or impression. It can also be the forced adaptation of the known toem tot.

At this point of the study, it was already known that the team members of the ATML were searching for males to represent the melodic ideas of a place. For instance, they asked for lullabies among all villagers, knowing that men were the main singers of lullabies and other songs. Women were only later being accepted as singers. Until the beginning of colonialisation and the presentation of recorded singers on various analogue carriers such as gramophone records and cassettes or on some private stages, female singers were seemingly not included as voice character.

All khaen players could sing the songs they accompanied. The female voice was tolerated mainly for its high pitches and the beauty of high-pitched singing, which might suggest strong projection. This practical idea might have been the source of beauty as ethnographers may report from other areas in the world that high-pitched voices were the normality when electric amplification did not yet take place. Justin Timberlake or Axel Rose may know things that are possibly not so needed anymore. An old-fashioned compliment addressed to a woman will have always included her voice character. For example, women were identified as soft speaking and speaking in high pitches. The louder and lower voiced a woman spoke, the less attractive she might have been. This tendency can be observed in the entire Lao society until nowadays. Finally, male voices were the normality of the place. They were not especially beautiful, which also shows the self-positioning of male musicians and singers as entertainers of as many as possible unspecified people who fit, for example, in a large music hall or a sports stadium. Further studies in this direction may have to follow soon. I can say definitely that the hierarchies of beauty ideals found through observations of musicians and age groups are real in remote villages.

REMARKS

All depictions are made by the author, if not mentioned otherwise, owned by the author or obtained by the author as staff member and as head of the ATML. Drawings and transcriptions are entirely made by the author. Also, there are no conflicts of interest to be observed. I am aware of missing out a large literature review, as many books and articles appeared in this century. However, this is not a literature review.

Interestingly, the co-existence of two personally owned musical instruments in the village context can cause the survival of that musical instrument that is played for non-entertainment purposes. In other words, the social function of a wind instrument in the ritual context may not change, although rituals may have changed. Further studies are needed to confirm that.

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