



1



2



3

Singing through the microphone

Tai Dam Traditional Music and Modernity in Laos

By Marie-Pierre Lissoir



4

It was the second day of the New Year in Houay Yong, a village in northern Laos. It was also the first time the village had access to electricity, and, to celebrate, had hired a live band, complete with amplifiers and electric keyboards. The excitement in the village square was palpable as the band set up the oversized speakers that have become so ubiquitous throughout the country.

But, as the festivities kicked off, the mood quickly dissipated. The usual early performance by traditional

Tai Dam singers, so often a source of joy for locals, had been hijacked uncomfortably by the unorthodox use of a microphone - distorting the voices and removing the intimate quality of the merging voices. The town square was now empty, and it was only early evening. The live band tried its best to liven the mood, with a singer and keyboard player performing pop songs through the massive speakers, but locals were put off by the noise.

And then, a noisy group approached in the distance. As it drew closer to the plaza, it became clear they were singing and dancing. At its centre, musicians sang and played drums, cymbals and the mouth organ, performing a traditional lam salavan - a common sight throughout the country for any kind of celebration.

Surrounded by dancing and shouting men, women and kids, the

rambunctious group settled in the middle of the village square, silencing the electric keyboard. The crackling distortion of the speakers was now replaced by human voices and the quavering mouth organ, mixed with the shouting and clapping of party-goers. Several women, dancing, dragged onlookers into the group, and the gathering grew steadily bigger, re-appropriating the social space of the village square.

The Tai Dam ethnic group belongs to the Tai Kadai ethno-linguistic family, with the largest portion of the community settled in the northern part of the country, close to Vietnam. The group's traditional singing, called khap, is performed by a soloist, with a chorus sung by the audience. Khap Tai Dam is usually performed during celebrations, with singers sitting among the other guests, eating and drinking alcohol, and singing whenever they feel like it. It's as informal a setting you can get, with the audience drinking, shouting and clapping with the music. Most of them, however, sing the chorus, and encourage the singer with shouting and clapping.

In the Tai Dam community, singing is used for entertainment, to give advice or express personal feelings, and plays



5

an important role in the construction of social relations. But with the arrival of electricity comes a new setting for the performance of khap, now using sound installations with speakers and microphones. This modern set-up has had an interesting influence on the singing itself and its community role.

The soloist is now isolated from the audience, holding a microphone on a stage or in front of a big banner. The audience is far removed from the singer and no longer joins with the chorus. This formal setting, usually linked to official celebrations, is now more and more frequent in the villages of Laos. When performed in this context, the songs have a reduced role in community cohesion, as the audience no longer participates. The setting also influences the topic of the songs, as people are unlikely to express personal feelings in this new context.

Morphs in culture occur constantly in Lao villages, just as they do in all human societies, and results can be mixed. For example, traditional cultural practices, such as music and handicrafts, are often strongly influenced by the arrival of electricity and new media.

While microphones and speakers modify some of the roles fulfilled by music and could, in some cases, dampen creativity, the newly amplified voices can now be heard by a wider audience, and captured on video and voice recordings by young people leaving for the city, allowing them to maintain cultural links with their home villages.

Change can be scary and discombobulating, but it is integral to any human experience. Nothing is black or white. But when changes are rapid and uncontrolled, they can be destructive. In these cases, local organisations like museums or handicraft associations play an important role in the preservation of changing traditions. Without impeding dramatic cultural shifts, they can keep track of traditional knowledge. It will then be up to future generations to find some interest in the richness of the traditional practices of Laos, and grasp the tools that are left at their disposal.

To learn more about the culture of minority groups in Laos, please visit the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang.



6



7

1. Traditional Tai Dam house
2. Ma River, Houaphan province
3. Tai Dam singers during a celebration
4. Oversized speakers in the village square
5. Young singer with a musician
6. Tai Dam women during New Year celebrations
7. Tai Dam singers and a mouth organ player

Images: Marie-Pierre Lissoir.

taeclaos.org