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SARDINIAN AIR IN LAO PIPES

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Subject: Migration of the Lao mouth organ *khen* into Europe and its use on Sardinia.

Purpose of study: Analyzing conditions of migration of a unique musical instrument through colonial and religious contacts and the re-setting of playing techniques without further impact on their symbolic background in the country of its origin and of its destination.

Methods: Holistic view: historical, systematic-analytical, ethnological-organological.

Keywords: Mouth organ, *launeddas*, Sardinia, Laos, Thailand, holistic research, migration of musical instruments, missionary activities in East Asia, Catholic church.

Many studies are dedicated to the development of *launeddas* on the island of Sardinia (Karlinger 2002; Deplano 1996; Lortat-Jacob 1981 and 1995; Contu 1997; Giannattasio 1979 and 1985 a.o.; Bentzon 1969). Rarely known is the fact that Catholic scholars and their Lao pupils distributed the Lao mouth organ in some rural areas of the island, where it was played by Sardinian shepherds. This article will discuss the reason and the conditions of that strange exchange of musical instruments as well as the implemented symbols over a distance of more than 10.000 km, which resulted in the adoption of the Lao *khen*.

If Lao people would get the opportunity to have a look at the stone pots in the “Foresta petrificada” near Perfugas and Martis (two small villages of the Sardinian Anglona), they would immediately shout out: “How did our pots come to this place?” Indeed it seems to be very strange to find such similar jars on the far island of Sardinia as those of the famous “plain of jars”, which are a cultural identity marker of the Xienkuang plateau in Laos.

Both places are situated very far from one another, and it is completely believable that both places did not and will not have any deeper relationship with each other.

Incidentally, I found another deeper connection between two objects existing in both places: the mouth organ *khen*. Normally played by soloists or accompanying



Fig. 1. Foresta petrificada (Perfugas / Martis), Anglona, Sardegna, 2005.

Photo: Gisa Jähnichen



Fig. 2. The plain of jars in Xiengkhuang, Laos, 2000.

Photo: Archives of Traditional Music in Laos



Fig. 3. *Khen*-players in the “Archives of Traditional Music in Laos”, in the foreground Kongdeuane Nettavong, the director of the National Library in Vientiane.

Photo: Gisa Jähnichen

singers, you can see here below a strange crowd of *khen* players in our Laotian office at the National Library in Vientiane.

In our media section you can find among others many recordings for Lao five-, six-, seven- and eight-foot-*khen*. We also store a wide range of additional material such as photos and video documents about *khen* construction and have written a small book about it in Lao language, beginning with the words “*Khen* playing is without doubt one of the essential parts of Lao musical culture. Many people identify the sound of the *khen* with their native cultural expressions” (Nettavong / Jähnichen 2002: 6).

In the spring of 2005 I visited Sardinia and I observed many small souvenir and tobacco shops with some Lao *khen* suspended about or leaned against the wall. I thought that these instruments were exotic souvenirs from the Far East. I did not take them seriously until I saw a Sardinian man buy one and blow into it. I visited a specialist, Don Giovanni Dore from Tadasuni – an enthusiastic amateur collector of musical instruments and related objects such as old records, dancing dresses

and manuscripts. He revealed to me a completely new view on the term “National Symbol”. In his collection and through his fresh interpretation, I found the answer to the question: “Why do we see so many Lao mouth organs in the street shops in Sardinia?” Hoping to be only deceived for a short moment and be told that the named mouthorgans are really only nice souvenirs or an exotic detail in the collection of a spleeny priest, I started further investigations on my last field trip in Laos. Finally, I have to correct myself: there was a very early exchange of musical instruments, which are by their special means “national symbols”. Catholic scholars and their Lao pupils distributed the Lao mouth organ in some rural areas where it was played by Sardinian shepherds. After an interruption between 1974 and 1990, the Lao mouth organ found its way back to Sardinia, where it became a part of local culture.

The key lies in the history of missionary activities in East Asia. In the 16th Century, Catholic missionaries dominated this territory as religious pioneers of following invaders (Mersenne 1636/1965: 308). Religion and nations in Europe of that time were not congruently developed as seen in the missionary activities in East Asia. First came the Portuguese, followed by the French, and then by all the other missionaries, brothers and sisters of different parts of the Catholic church. The picture of these activities is very colorful and does not allow one to see a specific plan in the region of later Indochina, especially in Laos, the most backward territory between Vietnam and Siam. Single brothers or priests visited the towns along the upper Mekong. They tried to settle in Luang Prabang, in Vientiane, in Paksan, Savannakhet, Takhek, Khongsedon and Pakse. Remarks quoted in some local palm leaf manuscripts mention foreigners with strange religious ambitions who collected orphans and educated them (Cheney 2006).

Important were the following events in the last two centuries:

Baptist John Taylor, who lived a long time in Pattaya (not a Catholic priest), translated in 1843 the New Testament into Thai language, which can be understood by Lao people as well. In 1850 schools were founded in urban areas along the so called Southern route from Vientiane to Paksan. These schools served as convents; they produced food for their own needs and they were generally open to everybody, not only to orphans (Vatican 2006). It was there that the first Laotian priests started their education. Before such schools were opened, missionaries brought back with them the most promising candidates to their homelands, who were then sent to different convents for further instruction. Along with these promising candidates, the Lao *khen* arrived in Europe.

Later on Apostolic Vicariates were founded in Thakhek, in Luang Prabang and Pakse that tried to control the activities around the second Indochina war. At that time, the very first Vietnamese Catholics were crossing the Truong Son Mountains and remained along the Mekong. Another important background was the durable establishment of Catholic missionary centers in Thailand and Burma (now Myanmar). The whole Northeast of Thailand is mostly inhabited by Lao people called Isan. They are also producing and playing *khen* since they had effective trade connections to the seaside as well as to the Lao heartland.

All these details are not so very surprising. But what is surprising is the fact that the majority of all important Catholic bishops and cardinals within or in known connection to Laos are of Italian descent (i.e. from the territory of the later Italy). This phenomenon continues until today. On the other hand, in Thailand we find an emphasis on missionaries from France.

When the missionaries brought some of their students to European provinces, they were mostly distributed all over the country, including the islands Sardinia and Sicily. Therefore, the historic connection was clearly of religious character with a strong missionary background, which was not very successful in the proselytized countries like Laos or Northwestern Thailand, but the cultural exchange curiously had an opposite effect concerning another matter.

Now it is time to return to the Sardinian basics: the tradition of playing *launeddas*. We could listen to two different recordings, one made in 1930, the other in 1996. The old recording of Efisio Melis, one of the famous *launeddas* players who was viewed as an outsider dealing with strange ideas, is called like the tuning of the *mancosa manna* and *mancosedda*, the two playing cane pipes. Luigi Lai, now the Sardinian symbol of musical traditions, plays in a similar tuning his “Su ballu e’ prazza”. The tuning of the pipes is not very different.

In the North of the province Oristano is the very small town Tadasuni. There, Don Giovanni Dore lives in a traditional old house built from field stones. He is the priest of the town and he has a wonderful collection of musical instruments: a one string spike fiddle with a goat blister as a resonating bridge (a quite similar instrument I found on Madeira in the little town Santana); a prehistoric stone pipe which has to be closed by hand while playing, otherwise it doesn’t sound; other musical instruments with signal function as, for example, the friction drum of the Supramonte region. He also had enough time to explain his collection in detail, including his *launeddas*. I discovered again the Lao *khen* in one row together with pipes and *launeddas* and I



Fig. 4. Don Giovanni Dore playing the Lao *khen* as Sardinian sheperds do it.
Photo: Gisa Jähnichen

told him that I can play it and that, for a few years, I was in the country of its origin. He looked somehow amused and gave me the instrument for a short performance.

He said that it sounds good but here on the island of Sardinia it is played in the contrary direction as seen in the picture.

The instrument is called *organu a bocca* and is used for accompanying dances and pure entertainment. It is possible to blow without circular breathing, therefore it is well known and popular among the shepherds and other amateurs. It is produced somewhere in Northeast Thailand – he did not remember exactly from where – and is sold everywhere on the island. There was a time when it was difficult to get one, but now, as I should have noticed – it is easy to buy one. Finally, he told me that it has a very long tradition, a statement which I could not believe immediately.

Let us repeat the necessary tuning possibilities and requirements for the *launeddas*. Today, we find these combinations of the *mancosa manna* and the *mancosedda*: *mediana*, *mediana a pipa*, *fiorassiu*, which is in tuning similar to *simponia*, *punt'e organu*, and *fiuda bagadia*.

Fig. 5. Different tunings of *mancosa manna* and *mancosedda*.

Realisation: Gisa Jähnichen

The *Lao khen* and the *organu a bocca* I explored on Sardinia are not very different in the intervallic relation but the first cane is moderately higher by approximately one whole step. Now let us analyze the playing technique “a contrare”. In the spectral view you can see some continuing lines, the drones, which are produced by closing the pipe holes with the left hand index and middle finger. The other interrupted lines are the melodic patterns created with the thumb of the left hand on the backside and with the right hand in the half rounded front side. The light vertical stripes are the volume pulses as the result of the breathing rhythm.

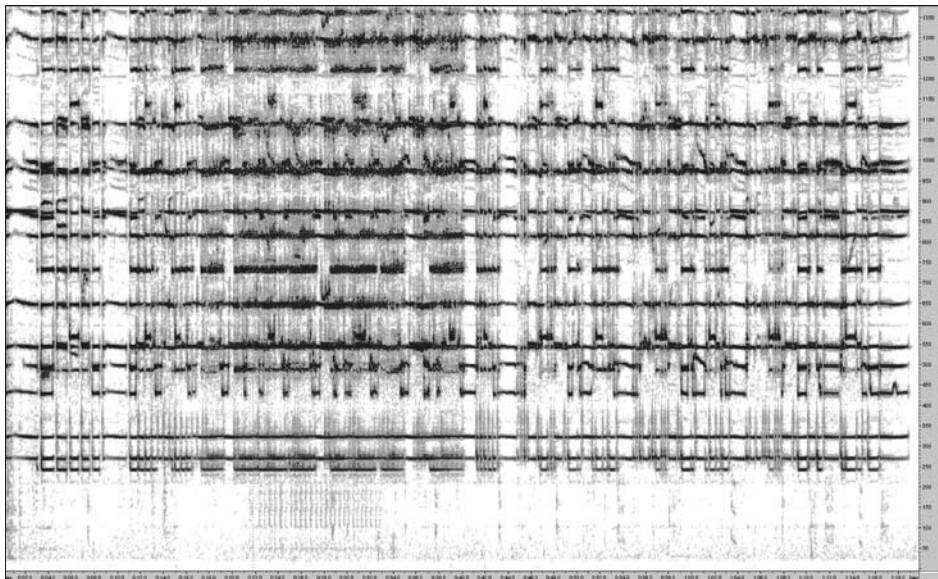


Fig. 6. Spectral analytical image of the piece performed by Giovanni Dore.
Realisation: Gisa Jähnichen

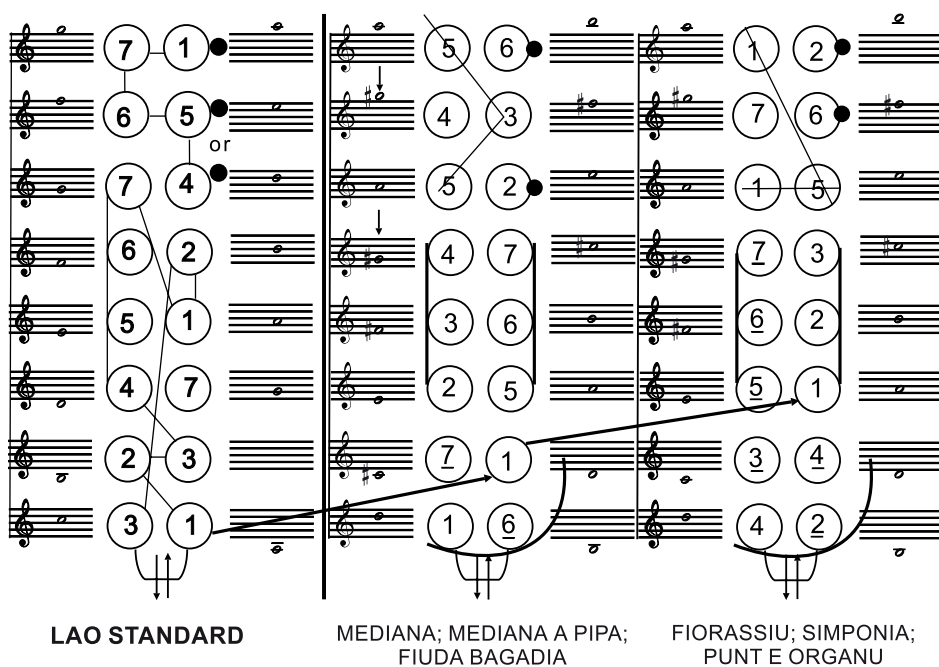


Fig. 7. Models of re-interpretation through shifting of tonal and substitution of fixed drones through mobile drones.
Realisation: Gisa Jähnichen

Now we can compare the traditional Lao understanding of playing orders as we, the staff of the Archives of Traditional Music in Laos, described it in our research. Mostly there is a linear order between two or four intervals in one row while the drones are fixed for the whole performance in a fifth or in a fourth. The Sardinian understanding of the eight-foot *khen* – alias *organu a bocca* – is different in the choice of the basic pipe. I could examine two different models.

One model shifts the basic pipe to the next pipe on the right side. In this case the index finger of the left hand closed the third, the left hand on the backside covers the fifth in one octave, and the other “mobile drones” are used while modulating the melody in the context of the dominant and sub-dominant. The second type shifts the basic pipe to the second one of the right side. It means that the index finger of the left hand closes the fifth and on the backside the octave of the basic pipe is covered by the left hand. There is the same possibility of “mobile drones” for the dominant and sub-dominant. The right hand fingers and the thumb of the left hand play around the key melodies, which are a fifth higher than in the other model. This indicates a further advantage: it should be possible to change the tuning immediately: in the first model the player can serve the *mediana*, the *mediana a pipa* and the *fiuda bagadia*; the second model fits into *fiorassiu*, *simponia* and *punt’e organu*. In that way we have one instrument that plays all tunings and that can be played continuously without circular breathing.

Our analysis clearly shows that the main transformation is not executed through the distance of 10.000 km but through the translation of the musical system under well prepared circumstances. Sardinian tunings are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of Sardinian music. Melodic patterns of songs and dances depend on that tuning. The construction and the pipe order of the Laotian *khen* tolerate those translations, even if it is not in use in Laos. The symbol of Lao musical traditions, in the Land of the thousand elephants, mutated into a symbol substitute on the Sardinian island, where mask dancers with bell bundles dance. Fortunately it cannot happen to the elephants.

Conclusions

Finally we can summarize that any kind of accidental transformation, perhaps caused by missionary travel activities, is based on the following conditions:

1. There must be needs in the transforming culture. Professional playing of *launeddas* becomes more and more difficult. There must be another compromise between tradition and modernity.

2. There must exist basic knowledge and experiences with the kind of music production. If Sardinian musicians did not have any *launeddas*, they never would have picked up the strange *khen*. For this reason, we do not find any other area in the surrounding where the Lao *khen* is played.

3. The transformation must be an advantage in one way or another. The *organu a bocca* is a six-in-one musical instrument, easy to learn and to play. Slight tuning modifications can be arranged by metal workmen.

Additionally, we can summarize: the Lao *khen* is a national symbol without a fixed ritual anchorage in a special social group. Everybody can use it, and everybody does use it. It emigrated through certain strange “religious activities”, which do not influence its further status as a national symbol.

The Sardinian *organu a bocca* is a substitute for *launeddas*, the national symbol of the island. It immigrated because both sides disrespected traditions, an attitude that is one of the most effective devices of human creativity. It does not influence the existence of *launeddas* as a national symbol.

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SARDINIJOS ORAS LAOSO DŪDELĖSE

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Santrauka

Launeddas raidai Sardinijos saloje skirta ne viena mokslo studija. Donas Giovanni Dore iš Tadasu-
nio, entuziastingas savamokslis muzikos instrumentų ir senovinių dalykų – senų įrašų, šokėjų drabužių
ir rankraščių – kolekcininkas, atskleidė man visiškai naują „nacionalinio simbolio“ sąvokos prasmę.
Giovannio kolekcija ir naujoviška jo samprata padėjo man rasti atsakymą į klausimą, kodėl Sardinijos
gatvių krautuvėlėse parduodama tokia gausybė laosietiškų dūdelių. Vildamasi bent trumpam atsiduoti
saviapgalei, neva šios dūdelės tėra vien dailūs suvenyrai, tolesnius tyrimus pradėjau pastarąjį kartą
lankydamasi Laose. Vis dėlto tenka pasitaisyti: iš pat pradžių tikrai įvyko savotiški muzikos instrumen-
tų, tam tikru būdu tapusių „nacionaliniais simboliais“, mainai. Katalikų mokslininkai ir jų mokiniai iš
Laoso išpopuliarino laosietiškas dūdeles kaimo vietovėse, ir jas pamėgo pūsti Sardinijos piemenys. Pra-
ėjus kuriam laikui, maždaug tarp 1974 ir 1990 metų, Laoso dūdelės vėl grįžo į Sardiniją ir tapo vietinės
kultūros dalimi. Straipsnyje aptariamos šių keistų mainų, įveikusių daugiau nei 10 tūkstančių kilometrų
atstumą, priežastys ir sąlygos.

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