

CHANGES IN MUSIC PRACTICES OF THE H' RÊ PEOPLE IN QUẢNG NGÃI PROVINCE

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Abstract

This paper explores the changes of music practices conducted by the H' rê people in Quảng Ngãi, Vietnam, which are highly impacted by a rapid globalization. In particular, two important issues are observed: One are changes in musical instruments, comprising changes in strings, changes in air tubes and resonance boxes. The other is the change in the entire music culture surrounding traditions such as the gradually or completely evolved disappearance of musical and non-musical functions, the shrinking common understanding of traditions, the counter-establishment of new popular music, and changes related to the communal environment. Discussing these issues, this contribution is to reveal several causes and to promote traditional values of the H' rê people in Quảng Ngãi province, Vietnam.

Keywords: H' rê, Music Practices, Traditional Ethics, Quảng Ngãi Province.

INTRODUCTION

The H' rê people live in the Trường Sơn - Tây Nguyên area, belonging to the Môn - Khmer language group and the South Asian linguistic family.¹ The number of H' rê people living in Vietnam is in the middle field of all counted different ethnic groups. H' rê people live mainly in the mountainous areas of Quảng Ngãi province, in the east of the Trường Sơn mountain range, concentrated in the river basin of the Rvá River (Minh Long), Lien River, H' rê River (Ba Tơ), or Rhê River (Sơn Hà). In addition, H' rê people also reside in An Lão district (in Bình Định province), Kon Plong district (in Kon Tum province) and some parts of Bình Thuận province.

Previously, in the time before 1975, the H' rê people were called by some other names: Mọi² Đá Vách, Mọi Sơn Phòng, Thượng Ba Tơ, Mọi Lũy, Chom, Chăm Rê, Chăm Quảng Ngãi. The people called themselves by the name of the river in the area. In An Lão (in Bình Định) there is the Đinh River, called "Nước Đinh"; in Minh Long (in Quảng Ngãi) there is the Rvá river, called "Rvá"; in Sơn Hà (in Quảng Ngãi), there is the Kré river, so, the people called themselves "the Kré people"; In Ba Tơ (in Quảng Ngãi), there is Liên river, so, they called themselves "Lien people" and along the H' rê river, they called themselves "H' rê people". The group along the H' rê River is more crowded (*Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam's Southern Provinces*. 1984).

The Trường Sơn - Tây Nguyên cultural space experiences special attention since many people living there are culturally endangered. Music and dance are well studied and results have to lead to recommendations that put the people's values at the center of decision making.

The people living in Quảng Ngãi are mentioned earliest in Lê Quý Đôn's (1726 - 1784) classical report *Phủ biên tạp lục*, vol.1. Then, in *Đại Nam thực lục* (frontier) (Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi

¹ Ethnic groups are determined by their distinct languages. In this paper, other than language differences cannot be considered since it is about recent developments and many people already merged with or moved to other groups of people sharing a joint territory in rural or urban areas of present-day Vietnam.

² "Mọi" comes with the meaning "the wilds of".

- 1970) (3), and also in *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, vol.5. All these classical works were published in the 1970s.

In the first half of the twentieth century, there were a number of French researchers, who wrote ethnographic notes about the savage people of the Quảng Ngãi region (H. Haguet 1905; H. Maitre 1912).

Much later, there were published compilations by Nguyễn Trắc Dĩ (1972) under the title *Vietnamese Ethnic Minorities (Origins and Customs)*.

All these sources have provided valuable information on habits, customs, and religious beliefs of the people living in the Highlands of Vietnam, including the H'rê people.

After 1975, many studies on the Trường Sơn - Tây Nguyên people were conducted, such as: *Ethnic minorities of Vietnam's Southern Provinces* by the Institute of Ethnology in 1984 and a book about the *Cultural Life of Ethnic Minorities in Quảng Ngãi Province* edited by Tạ Hiền Minh who gathered writings of some other authors with support of the Office for Culture and Information of Quảng Ngãi in 1996. This book is dedicated to the cultural life of three people in Quảng Ngãi: Co và Xơ Đăng. It consists of five chapters: Quảng Ngãi Mountains, its Nature and Population, Production Culture, Culture as a Guarantee of Life, Culture and Social Norms, and Cognitive Culture. In the chapters mentioned, previous literature was carefully reviewed and re-researched in addition to the fieldwork undertaken.

The book “Quảng Ngãi - Country - People – Culture”, edited by Bùi Hồng Nhân, Office for Culture and Information of Quảng Ngãi in 2001 has 3 parts, which are “Country”, “People”, and “Culture” that are embracing the entire territory of the people and their culture in Quảng Ngãi. It is a valuable document.

Documents further relating to H'rê music were written by Lê Huy and Minh Hiến (1994), who unfortunately did not mention the H'rê people as their writing concerns the entire country in which H'rê people might not have been very influential. But, introducing a number of Musical Instruments in Vietnam, Tô Ngọc Thanh (1995) at least mentioned some musical instruments and refers to similarities between instruments. Despite these few basic sources, there is a journal article by Nguyễn Thế Truyền (2000) on H'rê folk music that might be quite substantial and another writing by Lê Toàn (2001) in the *Academic Bulletin of the Music Institute in Hanoi*. This is a document about H'rê music, on which the author spent a lot of time surveying and recording with a team about ethnic minority areas in western Quảng Ngãi during the years 2000-2001. In 2010, another important source of knowledge became the book “*Instruments of the H'rê people in Quảng Ngãi*” by Nguyễn Thế Truyền who was supported by the Vietnam Folk Arts Association, and its Culture and Information Publishing House. This book, is a fairly complete and detailed monograph about H'rê musical instruments. However, the issues of the changes in these musical instruments used by the H'rê community have not yet been addressed.

This current study introduces music practices of the H'rê people that are still present in the places of Quảng Ngãi and in concentrated places, where they still live on under communal conditions and remember past music practices. Studying the evolution of H'rê music over a longer period of time, throughout different spaces, as well as in the context of globalization and technology 4.0 may impact a better understanding of today's developments.

Here, are applied interdisciplinary research methods of ethnography, anthropology, and music analysis such as open surveys, fieldwork observations, personal interviews with H'rê musicians.

During the last decades, music practices of the H'rê people changed tremendously. In this paper, two issues are looked at: 1) instrumental music, and 2) the transformation of the entire musical culture.



FIGURE 1: The traditional stilt house of the H'rê people in Teng village, Ba Thanh, Ba Tơ district (photo by the author).

SOME CHANGES IN INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

The acculturation process can be clearly observed are shown in specific strings, musical instruments and resonators of some musical instruments. These changes are often interpreted as scientific and technological achievements.

Variation in Strings

According to the older musician and instrument maker Đinh Ngọc Su (born in 1943) in Tà Pa village, Sơn Thượng commune, Sơn Hà district and Đinh Văn Uoc (born in 1946) in Ba Tơ town, Ba Tơ district, the H'rê used *k'jăh* (a kind of forest rope), or cat intestine to make strings for the *rođoang*, *k'rau*, *b'rooc*. Then they switched to using iron wire (guitar strings, telephone wires). Now, many of use nylon strings (nylon guitar strings or fishing threads, which is that type of threads bought per meter and being also used to knit fishing nets).



FIGURE 2: The *rođoang* is made by Đinh Văn Ước (photo by the author).

The replacement of these types of wires is not only a matter of material but also causes profound changes in their music. When performing, each type of strings will bring a different timbre and volume results.

String material won from rotang, and also cat intestines will give fuzzy sounds that do not much resonate with the soundbox. Moreover, because the strings may have inconsistent diameters and differ in their

thickness even in short segments of the same string, they do not sound in the right pitch or volume, as they should do according to present-day expectations.

Iron strings have a much clearer sound, they are rich in overtones and resonant, but the sound seems less warm and deep.



FIGURE 3: The *k'râu* tree of the H'rê (photo by the author).

Nylon material is not as good as iron strings, but it sounds warmer and deeper in timbre. This kind of sound, is seemingly more suitable for the lyrical, charming love songs that are expected. Therefore, it is on purpose that the H'rê instrument makers and musicians choose this type of material for strings.



FIGURE 4: *B'rooc* of the H'rê (photo by the author).

Changes in Air Tubes and Resonator Boxes

Recently, there have been cases where plastic pipes (water pipes) were used to replace bamboo pipes. There exist a two-pipe-set called *vàpút* (2 bamboo pipes), a three-pipe-set called *pênhpút* (3 bamboo pipes), and the five-pipe-set called *akhung* (5 bamboo pipes).



FIGURE 5: *Vápút* performance (photo by the author).

In case that plastic tubes replace the bamboo pipes of the above instruments, the sound is affected. It is obviously less clear.



FIGURE 6: *Akhung* performance (photo by the author).

Through some interviews, the musicians answered all the same way, because this item has a shape similar to many other instruments.

In the Son Hà District Art Festival (Quảng Ngãi) in 2003, a case of musicians was encountered who were replacing the resonator box (usually the gourd) of the *b'rooc* and *k'râu* with an aluminum tin can. After doing so, they were pleased because the sound was strange, bright, and metallic. However, according to the musicians observed, this replacement makes the sound of the instruments slightly lifeless and less lyrical.

This seems to be a way to satisfy the curiosity and hunger for discoveries of the young artists. However, in these cases, if used for communal repertoire, no material can replace the traditional material, because it is strange to the sound of the H'rê.

CHANGES IN MUSIC CULTURE

In the process of development, songs of daily use among the H'rê sung in their language changed in some aspects as in the following. These changes, which affected the text of songs and the skills to accompany them by the H'rê musicians, led to a complete loss of some and the transition into pop music for some others.

The Change of Circumstances Leading to the Current Situation

The research revealed that there are some H'rê musical instruments that have now disappeared. For example, the *vâk k'jeo* (wind bell), *k'la jec* (water instrument), *chinh k'vanjar*, *ling la*, *ravai*, and 8-gong-set. These instruments, could only be traced through the stories of aged villagers or through books written far earlier. In today's life, they do not exist practically.

Vâk k'jeo (wind bell)

The wind bell was actually the "astronomical and meteorological station" that initially served the H'rê people as the weather forecast. So far, it has completely disappeared and has been replaced by radio, television, mobile phones, defacto the internet, to which everyone can see or listen to weather forecasts.

K'la jec (water instrument)

The water instrument, was in fact one of the earliest irrigations and farming tools used by the H'rê people. It is, so far, completely gone. The water instrument, a system of tubes placed in a way that leads water from a higher level to a lower level and had a typical sound if the balance was given and had a strange sound or no sound if there was a problem, are replaced by irrigation canals and water pumps.

Chinh k'van

Through the story of the Đinh Ngọc Su in Tà Pa settlement, Sơn Thượng village, Sơn Hà community, Quảng Ngãi, district, this was briefly described as follows: *chinh k'van* consists of 3 small bamboo segments, a performance must have 3 people playing it. The way of use and the patterns of playing are already unknown.

Ling la, ravai and gong (8 pieces)

In the Book of Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam's Southern Provinces (1984) of the Institute of Ethnology, is written about a number of instrumental music of the H'rê: "*Ling la* is like a bamboo flute, *ravai* is structured in a humble way". This description is rather not clear. Also, "In some upland areas, the H'rê have a *ching* dance with eight gongs holding the beat." Cannot help much in reconstructing the lost items.

During fieldwork, these instruments were not seen. Although research in the region was often supported by state institution³ which helped in the search, there had to be realized that the instruments named *ling la*, *ravai*, *chiêng* (8 pieces) of the H'rê, as this book stated, have likely been lost to the musical life of this community and to humankind.

Regarding the text-bound songs, singing *kaêh* (children's singing) of the H'rê children has died out for a long time. According to the observation, at least through the gaze of the generation of grandparents today, children do no longer sing the same songs. However, the children of the H'rê people do sing and

³ Collaboration was conducted with the following institutions: Music Institute (Vietnam National Academy of Music), Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism), Voice of Vietnam, Vietnam Television, Da Nang Television, Quảng Ngãi Radio and Television Station and a number of foreign research groups (such as the Study Expedition in Ethnology, led by Prof. Tamura Jumi

singing is one of the attractive activities. On the contrary, the young pupils and students participate a lot in popular Vietnamese singing programs organized by the school and some local teams.

Narrowing Repertoires

Along with the socio-economic development seasonal music practices disappear such as: *Túc k'oa* (Frog jumping), *Tuc h'lay* (Voice of the waterfall), *Tuc tuguoc* (Rainy bird sounds); Sing song (*t'jeo*), crying-singing (*taoi*), singing lullaby (*vađôcon*), singing love songs (*taleu*), singing stories (*tamon*) (equivalent to epic *khan* singing of some people inhabiting the Central Highlands). These practices are diminished or significantly eroded.

For example, singing *kachoi* is a genre only for adults, that is to talk about teaching their children, to care for a wife and a husband. This type of songs, so far, has died out.

Fieldwork and researches made obvious that it is increasingly rare for H'rê boys and girls to chat in their mother tongue. Thereby, it was also said that singing traditional songs in H'rê language takes place naturally during community activities, but this were very rare.

Current Popular Music

Currently, the main instrumental music called according to the instruments used *chinh*, *tàvố*, *b'rooc* và hát *talêu*, of the H'rê are popular in terms of being wide spread. There are two ways of caring about popular music practices: participating and consuming.

Participation

Direct dissemination of popular music practices takes place when musicians in the area are teaching and when people directly participate in performances of the arts and culture programs at district, provincial, and national levels. For example, in the past years, cultural houses in H'rê districts organized teaching lessons of traditional music. These classes have been taught directly by excellent musicians such as Đinh Ngọc Su, and Đinh Văn Ước. In addition to this teaching, some musicians also directly participate in performances on many different occasions. Specifically, cultural festivals of districts, Quảng Ngãi province, cultural festivals of ethnic minorities nationwide, or the Tây Nguyên gong festival and performances of folk musical instruments in Korea in 2010, 2011, among others.

Consumption

In addition to the direct and most popular way above, H'rê musical instruments are also popularized through indirect means. One of the most effective indirect ways is through channels of broadcasting and television stations. For many years, broadcast programs on music culture with H'rê people singing their songs on Quảng Ngãi Radio and Television, have contributed to indirectly disseminating some cultural and musical values of the H'rê people, who could follow the current development and fast changing public taste through modern mass media.

Changes Related to Social Environment

The exchange and transformation of the H'rê folk music relates to the social environment and the specific cultural space. The changes in function and method are quite profound in this process. Currently, due to the social encouragement to preserve and promote cultural heritage, the musical instruments might be restored in the near future.

Changes in Function

Changes in musical functions of instrumental music of the H'rê people can be seen in the following cases:

From performance function to display function

Once upon a time, the instrumental music of the H'rê was designed to be performed for their own spiritual life. However, since recent years, these instruments have been used for display and introduction into traditional houses, museums, resorts and some coffee shops. Here only some instruments are preferred such as *b'rooc* and *k'rau*.

From inside community performances to outside community performances

H'rê musical instruments are associated with the cultural environment of the community, even it is associated with each individual, such as the *b'rooc* and *k'rau*. The inclusion of these values on stage, in official meetings, conferences, reviews, or introductions of non-musical events, or promotion purposes in some tourist areas, this function is transformed: from a performance in the community to a performance outside the community.

Basic Changes

Some changes in the music practices of the H'rê people are very easily to observe. One is the simple duration of a performance item.

These changes are affecting everything though they are basic.

Changes in the duration of the lesson

H'rê instrumental music was usually performed by musicians who did not pay much attention to the duration of the performance. They only stopped when they were tired or could not play anymore or they felt challenged and were exchanged with another player. Going to the stage to perform, made the repertoire of instrumental music be mutilated and broken to fit the prescribed program that is constructed by people who, from their side, do not care about these preconditions. This way is contradicting the imagination of the H'rê people and their musicians. This approach degrades the musicians to become passive and losing their passion.

Changes in the song of music

The change in music functions, performers, performance space, duration of performances has resulted in:

The elasticity of the song is due to fact that these music practices are put on an anonymous stage.

The complexity in the performance changes and requires players changing into rather passive performers. This change, which inadvertently caused the previous "attention" of acting to be damaged. In the performance of instrumental ensemble music, the "intention" of the musicians is very important. These people were often in the same *p'lây*⁴ and usually often act together, so, the performance was smooth and could reach sophistication. This perfection, certainly cannot be trained overnight. Therefore, in these cases, the music practices of the H'rê people are not unique anymore. In response to stage performances, recruiting and integrating actors in different areas is unavoidable. In addition, organizers

⁴ *p'lây* = group of musicians that knows each other, friends, family members, the meaning of coming from the same village.

tend to choose beautiful young actors from different locations, rather than talented musicians to build stage performances according to their view on what is “beautiful”.

Doing this, has something and misses something: The thing is the wider spreading of musical skills in that communal environment, needs actors from areas with cultural exchange conditions. But it is not possible to have good and excellent performances of the H'rê, because the “well-meaning” actors have no chance to play in the same ‘village’ (*p'lây*).

The many H'rê students in ‘ethnic minority boarding schools’ of Quảng Ngãi province also unknowingly change the musical values of their *p'lây* performance. While studying the presentation of the H'rê music practices in various districts of Quảng Ngãi province, it became obvious that the H'rê students who attended ethnic minority boarding schools in the province (this is a very large number of people compared to the entire H'rê population) is one of the direct causes that can change cultural values of the H'rê in their *p'lays* performances. Over the years of studying in the provincial capital, the H'rê students have acquired another direction and were driven into many streams of Western music. Many students have become organ or guitar playing musicians and creating programs very professionally. After graduation, these people returned to their modern *p'lays* and became the “nucleus” or “the art scholars” of the locality. This is only a very understandable development following the expectations of the given social environment.

The performance space of the H'rê instrumental music is in houses on stilts or in front of them on the verandah, in their *p'lays*, their new fields ... In Quảng Ngãi, every year, under the slogan “Come once come every time”, there are often organized performances in order to foster cultural exchanges among communes and districts. The transformation of their performance space is reflected in these performances and in the repertoire. In addition, the performance space of the H'rê musical instruments may even expand into other provinces and cities throughout the country and abroad.

CONCLUSION

Although there is a will to spread widely, some musical practices, especially instrumental music of the H'rê people is still declining in community life. During some seasonal festivals, happy days, and weddings, musical activities are missing. Instead, there are electronic sounds of instruments as they are used by the Vietnamese majority such as organ, electronic guitar, or electronic drumset. Currently, most young H'rê people are less interested in the music of their community and its past times. Following this momentum, the risk of the disappearance of H'rê music practices is inevitable.

The changes related to the social environment are also expressed in terms of property ownership. Most musicians make their own instruments, except in the case of the *chinh* or *k'rengneng* (rattles), they must buy materials or trade from other places, so the H'rê instruments became a personal property. The state, organizations buy H'rê musical instruments to display them in museums, cultural and information centers, resorts, and some other places. This changes the way these instruments are built and it is a transformation related to the current social environment.

Luckily, the encouragement to preserve cultural heritage taking many examples throughout the country as a model, some musical instruments, but also figures, pins, frames, and fabrics will be restored in the near future.

The mountainous region of Quảng Ngãi is a place where people suffer many hardships and where people still have a good memory about the suffering from the wars. During this time, they had few conditions to organize traditional festivals, as well as other types of cultural activities. Due to the war, in many cases, the H'rê people had to live away from their hometown, so there was a lack of closeness and

community cohesion. A number of generations of H'rê people is born during the war, so there are few opportunities to stick with their traditional cultural capital.

Currently, the issue of cultural changes has been appeared very actively and strongly. This has led to the situation that some cultural values underwent a profound transformation, which is a challenge not only for H'rê music practices, but also for the music practices in general.

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