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Mechanisms of Categorisation in Tai Dam community of Laos:
Between Music and Identity

LISSOIR Marie-Pierre

Université Libre de Bruxelles (Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Mondes Contemporains) and Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3 (Laboratoire de Phonétique et Phonologie)*, Brussels-Paris, 1000-75005, Belgium-France
Email: mplissoir@gmail.com*

Abstract

This paper develops part of a PhD project in ethnomusicology entitled "Relevance and Musical Model, the Case of *Khap Tai Dam*", which is dedicated to the singing called *khap* of the Tai Dam ethnic group in Laos. The paper will give a global presentation of the research and its issues, focussing on the notions of melodic model and categorisation, and their relations with music and identity. The issues of melodic model and categories results from observations made in Tai Dam villages visited in the context of this research: the use of three melodic models as a basis for the construction of songs,

and the presence of ethnic and musical categories in the discourse of interviewees. The first part of the paper focuses on determination of melodic model through use of paradigmatic analysis. The second part is dedicated to musical categorisation and its criteria, and the role of melodic model as the main criteria of categorisation. The analysis will reveal that the model is the most relevant indication for musical categorisation, while language plays a major role in identity categorisation.

1. Introduction

This paper develops one of the main issues discussed in my PhD project: musical and ethnic categorization and its mechanisms. Untitled "Relevance and Musical Model, the Case of *Khap Tai Dam*", this PhD research is dedicated to the song genre (named *khap*) of the Tai Dam ethnic group in Laos. It studies the musical technique of the *khap*, and the construction of discourse, knowledge, and concepts, related to this music. Therefore, it deals with questions of musical technique (melodic pattern, relations between melody and speech tones, improvisation), transmission (implicit and explicit knowledge), and identity (influence of new media, ethnic and musical categorisations).

2. The *khap* singing of Tai Dam ethnic group in Laos

Tai Dam people (or Black Tai) are part of the Tai linguistic family (as are Lao, Lü, etc.). They settled all over Southeast Asia, but mainly in North Vietnam (Son La and Lai Chau provinces). During the last centuries, a part of the Tai Dam community fled Northern Vietnam because of colonization and war, and established in neighbouring Laos (especially in the northern provinces). Some Tai Dam categorise themselves as belonging to specific subgroups of Tai Dam identity. These subgroups and their names are linked to their region of origin in Vietnam, such as the Tai Wat subgroup (*Tai Dam* from *Muang Wat* in Vietnam). Several subgroups have been mentioned during the interviews realised in the Tai Dam[1] villages of Laos. More than simple ethnonym variations, they represent a cultural reality, as interviewees speak about *khap Tai Wat*, or *khap Tai Longmaa* for instance.

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[1] In this article, the use of the term "Tai Dam" will refer to the group in the wide sense (including subgroups such as Tai Wat). The same for the song's designations (*khap Tai Dam* will designate the songs of Tai Dam group in the wide sense). The references to Tai Dam or their songs in the restricted sense will be specified.

Fig. 1. Map of Laos with highlighted zones indicating the fieldwork places (source: populationdata.net).
Fig. 2. Tai Wat singers listening to recordings of *khap* in the village of Sèr, Houa Phan province, 2011.

The *khap* songs of Tai Dam can be considered as a singing technique made of a few identical principles present at each interpretation. The *khap* is a monodic form, sometimes close to recitative. It is sung by one person at a time or several alternating. Songs are based on a relatively fixed structure made of phrases sung by the performer and interspersed by refrains sung in unison by the audience. The analysis realised so far show that *khap Tai Dam* is based on a pentatonic anhemitonic scale.

Besides this recurrent structure, the *khap Tai Dam* is based on a certain number of melodic models around which the performer creates his song; a kind of basic framework underlying the construction of the song, and which serves as a support for the singer.

The *khap* is usually performed during parties taking place after ceremonies and rituals or, in more formal circumstances (hosting VIPs, political meetings). During or after the meal, a singer stimulated by alcohol starts singing to cheer his host or entertain the other guests. The singer remains seated among the guests, who may continue to eat and speak. The *mo-khap* (singer) performs alone, but the refrains are sung in chorus by the audience.

The technique of *khap Tai Dam* involves part improvisation in terms of music (building the song around the structure and the basic melody) and lyrics. These vary according to the context of the song and the singer's tastes and talent. There are different types of *khap Tai Dam*, sung according to the events of the Tai Dam community. They differ in their lyrics but the technique, and so the melodic model, remains the same. During my research in the villages of the Houa Phan and Bolikhamsay provinces, I heard four different musical patterns. Two models are performed by and associated with the Tai Wat subgroup. The first, performed only by a handful of elders, won't be a part of this research. The second shapes the majority of *khap* songs performed by Tai Wat and is called *khap Tai Wat.* Two other models are performed by Tai Dam (in the restricted sense) and are usually called *khap Tai Muay* and *khap Tai Longmaa.* These designations are linked to the performers and their region of settlement or origin (these issues will be developed in point 7).

The melodic model is thus a key notion to understand Tai Dam songs, on a musical and a social point of view. It is the cornerstone of the singing technique, a basic melody on which the performer builds his song. Its identification leads to study of the structure, scale, and influence of spoken language on the songs. However, while aspects such as speech tones and transmission are important for understanding Tai Dam singing technique, this paper will focus on the determination of the melodic model, and its relation with ethnic and musical categories.
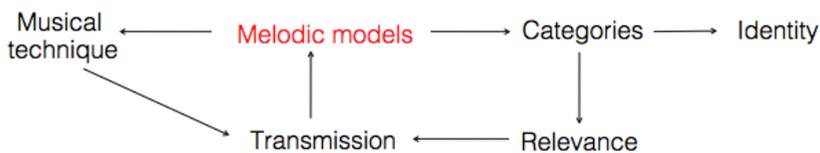
3. Problematic

Fig. 3. Main issues developed in the PhD research presented in this paper, with the notion of melodic model as central element.

As figure 3 illustrates, the melodic model is at the centre of this research. First of all, it is the basic framework from which the *khap* is built, and thus the main element of the musical technique. As we will see, it also plays a key role in the categorisation mechanisms of *khap Tai Dam*. As these designations refer to ethnic identity (Tai Wat) and specific regions (*Meunag Muay* and the region around the *Maa* river, Vietnam), issues of identity are also

investigated in this research. The melodic model and the mechanisms of categorisation are studied through the notion of relevance, as developed by Simha Arom. He explains that the code of a musical system has to be found by the determination of the relevant elements in the song (Arom 1982). The experiments developed in point 6 will seek to determine the relevant criteria of categorisation. Other experiments, such as the performance of songs with incorrect elements, will also be performed in order to determine the relevant elements of the song. This PhD research concludes by looking into the mechanisms of musical transmission, in which the melodic model and its refrain (the first element learned and performed by children) play a vital role.

4. Data

As the Tai Dam ethnic group and its music is seldom mentioned in scientific literature, five field seasons were realised in northern and central Laos between 2008 and 2013 for this research. The enquiry has been limited to five villages (Houay Yong, Na Kai, Xieng Khoun and Sèr in Houa Phan province, and Thongnamy in Bolikhamsay province, see map figure 1), in order to avoid generalisations about the Tai Dam and their cultural practices. The outcomes of this research results from interviews realised with all the actors of Tai Dam society (ritualists, singers, musicians, children, elders, etc.), as well as months of participative observation within the villages. Hundreds of audio and video recordings were realised, most of them in the traditional context of song

interpretation (spontaneous performance during a celebration). A few more were recorded at my request in a quiet environment in order to have workable material for analysis. While several *khap* were selected for analysis (lyrics translation, musical transcription, etc.), nine songs representative of the Tai Dam repertoire were selected for deeper analysis. For each of these songs (three associated to each melodic model), I possess an audio recording (and in most cases video too), a musical transcription, a spoken version of the lyrics, a transcription (in the Lao alphabet and IPA) and a translation of the lyrics, a phonologic transcription of the speech tones realised by ear, and a phonetic version realised with a computer program (such as Winpitch). For each song, I have also realised a paradigmatic analysis, in order to highlight the structure and musical model of the *khap Tai Dam* (see point 5). Several musical experiments such as collective audition of songs, performance of songs with deliberate errors, and a personal mastering of *khap* singing, allowed me to understand the mechanisms of construction and transmission of *khap Tai Dam* more deeply. An adapted methodology (such as the last methods mentioned) is essential in the analysis of an oral tradition such as *khap*, in which most of the knowledge is implicitly transmitted and little verbalised.

5. The Paradigmatic Analysis of *Khap Tai Dam*

5.1. Definition

The paradigmatic analysis is a method of semiotic, seeking to highlight "the code" (in this case the structure and melodic model of *khap*) of a musical piece (the "message") by segmenting and comparing melodic cells (Ruwet 1966). Elements that can substitute one another belong to the same paradigm and are thus written on a vertical axis (one below the other). Although, the reading direction of the score is on a horizontal axis, from left to right (Cumming 2001). Mainly used for the study of Western "classical music", this method is relevant in the analysis of *khap Tai Dam*, as it reveals the complexity of a musical genre that may seem repetitive and monotonous for the layman.

Fig. 4. Paradigmatic analysis of the first two phrases of a *khap Tai Dam* (*Tai Muay* genre).

The paradigmatic analysis is effectuated on *khap Tai Dam* recorded between 2008 and 2013. It starts with a musical transcription realised on a score with the help of a transverse flute (the instrument can be tuned to the pitch used by *khap Tai Dam*). The pitch in *khap Tai Dam* allows as well the use of the treble key. The rhythm (a complex element of this musical genre that is mostly situated

between speaking and singing)[2] is not transcribed as it is not a relevant element in determining the singing's code. Its analysis won't be developed in this article.

5.2. *The structure of* khap Tai Dam

The analyse clearly highlights the structure of the song: a melodic phrase beginning with a recurrent cell performed by the singer and ending with a refrain interpreted by the audience. This phrase's structure is also quite clear at audition, and is thus the basic unit for paradigmatic analysis. Each phrase is segmented into short melodic cells that correspond to the smallest divisible elements of the song. The segmentation of the cells is decided on the basis of the melody (each cell seems to have its own melodic identity and role in the phrase) and the lyrics. The determination of the paradigms (which cell can substitute each other and then be transcribed on a vertical axis) is primarily based on the melody of each cell (which share several notes or melodic movements) and their role in the musical phrase (tension, resolution, introduction of the phrase, introduction to the refrain, etc.).

The structure of the *khap* is schematised in figure 5. Each letter represents a paradigm (and the melodic cells associated to it). The red ones are the recurrent elements (coming back with identical melody and lyrics in each phrase of the song), while the green ones are melodic cells that vary and recur in a non-systematic order. The

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[2] The ambitus of the song is quite limited.

recurrent cells are used to begin the phrase (see "Departure Cell" on fig. 5) and end it (see "Refrain" in fig. 5)[3]. The refrains are not performed by the singer but the audience present during the interpretation. In order to inform the audience of the phrase's imminent end, the soloist performs a short melodic cell as a signal for the performance of the refrain (see "Pre-refrain" in fig. 5)[4].

Structural model: singing fragmented in melodic cells, that recur identically (Departure cell, Pre-refrain, Refrain) or varied (cells).

1. Dc A A B A C B A B C A D D E Pre-refrain Refrain

2. Dc E C A D A E C Pre-refrain Refrain

3. Dc B C B A E D A C A Pre-refrain Refrain

4. Dc C A E A C A E A C C B Pre-refrain Refrain

5. Dc...   A   ...   Pre-refrain Refrain

Fig. 5. Structure of five phrases of *khap Tai Dam* realised after paradigmatic analysis.

5.3. Establishing the melodic model

On the basis of paradigmatic analysis, each cell belonging to the same paradigm is compared, and their most recurrent elements (pitch or melodic movements) are highlighted. These comparisons generate melodic cells based on the essence of those composing a paradigm. The cells in figure 6 represent the most relevant elements of each vertical column in the analysis, the code of the *khap*

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[3] The refrain is performed as a glissando between three notes (B-E-A). Only these notes are transcribed in the paradigmatic analysis, while the full melody is given in the melodic model figure 6.

Let us note that, unlike the example selected for this article, most of *khap Tai Dam* (whatever model they are based on) use two different refrains performed by the audience. In this case, the singer uses two different "pre-refrains" (each of them associated to a specific refrain), not only to signal the moment of refrain but also to indicate which refrain the audience has to perform.

[4] Analysis so far doesn't show the presence of a meta-model which would include the song's phrases and determine the sequence of its variable cells.

tai dam. These cells, composed of the most relevant elements of each paradigm, are the melodic model on which singers improvise their *khap Tai Dam*.

Fig. 6. The melodic model of each cell, resulting from paradigmatic analysis.

Similar results (identical structure, paradigms with similar roles or melody), at this stage of the research, occur for the other *khap* selected for the analyses, regardless of their genre (*khap Tai Wat*, *khap Tai Muay* or *khap Tai Longmaa*).

6. The Categorisation and its Mechanisms

The study of musical categorisations results from observations realised in every village visited: the existence of ethnic and musical categories in the interviewee's discourse. Indeed, each *khap Tai Dam* performed is categorised by Tai Dam community members according to a specific geographical zone (the native region of its users), and linked to a specific ethnic

identity. Thus, Tai Dam people (in the restricted sense) living along the *Maa* river sing *khap Longmaa* or *khap Tai Muay* (a genre linked to the region of *Meuang Muay* in Vietnam), and the Tai Wat community sing the genre of *khap* named *khap Tai Wat*. While these categories can be referred to under different names (the denominations used in this article are the ones most often mentioned by interviewees, but the categories can have different names), they represent the reality of Tai Dam musical practices and the discourse linked to it.

As a researcher, I identify and categorise a song according to its melodic model (its "code", see above). However, several informants seem to base their categorisation on other criteria, such as the language of the lyrics. It is thus important to determine the criteria of categorisation of local communities. Are they similar to mine? What are the mechanisms leading to the categorisation of the *khap Tai Dam*? Do musical categories correspond to ethnic ones (Tai Wat, Tai Longmaa, Tai Muay, etc.)? To answer those questions and identify implicit knowledge related to this musical practice, several experiments have been conducted in the five Tai Dam villages visited for this research.

Three kinds of interactive interviews were developed in order to generate an explicit discourse on melodic models and the knowledge interviewees have about it. Most of the first two kinds of interviews described here were

collective, in order to facilitate verbalisation through dialogue.

The first experiment consists of listening to recorded songs based on different melodic models. Around ten song genres (from the Tai Dam ethnic group but also Tai Deng or Lao) were listened to, among which were the three genres performed in the visited villages. The interviews were recorded and the answers collected in a table listing the terms used for categorisation and their criteria (the question "how do you identify this genre" was asked after the interviewee's first comments). The main objective of this experiment was the determination of categories. These were determined in the interviewee's discourse by associating the songs to a specific region or ethnic group (or subgroup). While different names and criteria were used, each song proposed (based on a different musical model) was associated to a different genre and thus a different category of *khap*. Once the categories were determined, they had to be confirmed by a next experiment.

The second experiment consists of listening to different songs based on the same musical models. Thus, several songs associated to the same genre were proposed to the interviewees in order to observe if, despite the difference in interpreter (coming from different regions of Laos or Vietnam), the songs would still be categorised as belonging to the same genre (*khap Tai Wat*, *khap Tai Muay*, *khap Longmaa*). The results showed that a strong majority of interviewees associated songs based on the same melodic model to the same musical category. Two

categorisation criteria emerge in the results tables: the melodic model (interviewees don't explicitly mention it but speak about *siang thamnong*, the "sounds of the melody" or refer to the refrain), and the interpreter's language (interviewees mentioned the *siang vao*, "spoken sounds"). However, my musical categories, which correspond to those of the interviewees, are based only on the melodic model, as my knowledge of Tai Dam language doesn't allow me to differentiate local accents.

A third kind of experiment was thus conducted in order to verify the relevance of the melodic model in the categorisation of *khap Tai Dam*. To achieve this purpose, hummed songs were proposed to interviewees. Based on recorded songs, I performed two hummed phrases (keeping thus only the melody and not the lyrics) of the three genres of *khap* used in the studied area. Two versions were proposed to interviewees, one without the performance of the refrain (the most melodic element of the model, easy to identify and recurring regardless the interpreter), and a second with the hummed performance of the refrain if the interviewee was not able to identify the song after the first hearing. A strong majority of interviewees, singers or not, were able to categorise the song as *khap tai Wat*, *khap Tai Muay* or *khap Longmaa*, without the help of the local accent given through the lyrics[5].

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[5] Further research will soon be performed on the hummed versions of the songs themselves, in order to ensure the absence of speech tones in the performance, which could help the interviewee to identify a local accent despite the absence of lyrics.

7. Conclusions

Although each performance of *khap Tai Dam* is unique, they are all based on the same structure and a limited number of basic melodies. The melodic model, represented in this article as short melodic cells associated according to structural and aesthetic criteria, is what Ruwet calls "the code" of the *Khap Tai Dam*, while each interpretation of *khap* is "the message" based on this code. The songs' transcription and the use of paradigmatic analysis highlight such a code, giving the key principle for the construction of *khap Tai Dam*.

While language and melodic model can both be used as categorisation criteria for *the khap Tai Dam*, the melody at the base of the *khap* is the most relevant element in the identification of musical genres. The language however, plays an important role in the identity dimension of the singing, as it allows identification of the singer's region of origin as well as ethnic identity. While the Tai Dam (in the strict sense) of the villages of Na Kai and Xieng Khoun perform *khap Tai Longmaa* as well as *khap Tai Muay*, the inhabitants of Thongnamy, Houay Yong and Sèr, all Tai Wat, only perform *khap Tai Wat*. A Tai Wat can of course interpret a *khap Tai Longmaa* for instance, but will immediately be spotted as a Tai Wat singer performing a *khap Tai Longmaa*, because of the local accent. Language is thus the most relevant criteria of ethnic categorisation. While the three melodic models are known by Tai Dam (in the strict sense) as well as Tai Wat, it is their local accent that will determine which genre of *khap* they

perform. Siiphone, a singer from the Tai Dam village of Na Kai, explains the phenomenon with these words: "If you are a tiger, you will never be a deer. If you are a wolf, you will never be a goose".

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