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Field Note

Musical Instruments used in Rituals of the Alak in Laos

The Alak (Harak, Hrlak) people comprise almost 15 percent of the population of the provinces of Sekong and Salavan in Laos. Their lives changed dramatically after infrastructural development began in the region. Although they were exposed to different power systems during wartime and in the course of migration in the areas between Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, they developed cultural strategies that could not be easily replaced by means of modern communication, and musical instruments used in rituals are one of these cultural strategies. Though all musical instruments undergo changes in their construction, sound quality, and spiritual associations, they play an important role in maintaining the cultural stability of communities due to their function within society. In this note I focus on specific tangible and intangible aspects of musical instruments within Alak communities. Tangible aspects of musical instruments such as their physical shape and place among other cultural objects are considered in relation to intangible aspects perceived through rituals. I therefore discuss the sustainability of tangible and intangible aspects under the rapidly-changing social conditions faced by the Alak community.

KEYWORDS: southern Laos—Alak culture—ritual music— ethnic identity musical instruments

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This study focuses on the Alak (Harak, Hrlak) people, who comprise almost 15 percent of the population of the provinces of Sekong and Salavan in Laos. I examine intangible aspects of Alak culture that are expressed through traditional knowledge and musical skills, and tangible[1] aspects in terms of sound production, the meaning of the instruments within the community, and the key people involved. The main aim is to discuss the cultural independence of the Alak and how these tangible and intangible aspects of musical instruments are sustained when their ethnic identity is challenged. I examine changing communication patterns, ethnic identity issues related to rituals, and questions of social progress and spirituality related to tangible innovations such as new musical instruments introduced into the community. I also look at the world views that reflect how the Alak deal with musical instruments by observing the use of old instruments in rituals and people's perceptions of their intangible value.

Rituals that are considered to be intangible culture by the UNESCO convention are especially vulnerable because of their strong dependence on specialist knowledge, their importance for the consistency and continuity of communal life, and related conditions. Amid fast-changing community structures, rituals may play a key role in a community. Rituals must compete with the external pressures of modern communication, technological innovation, lifestyle appropriation through various media, and increasingly personal encounters with strangers from distant cultures. While some communities in southern Laos deconstruct at least large parts of their ritual lives to a degree of folklorization that allows for spatial and personal independence in their performing arts (Homsombat and Jähnichen 2012, 40–44), Alak people, as I observed them, maintain their rituals through the conscious preservation of their ritual tools and constant transmission of knowledge and skills, among them musical skills.

In the following sections, I outline the process of data collection with a brief discussion of the terminology used, introduce the Alak, and then discuss rituals and the meanings of musical instruments. Instruments are clearly divided into new and old according to their function and perception within the community and according to the rituals in which they are used. An example of gong playing will serve to illustrate a new culture of rituals among the Alak people.

Data collection

I conducted research over a period of ten years (1999–2009) using audiovisual recordings as part of a newly established media section at the National Library of Laos in Vientiane. A project that began in 1999, supported financially by the Ministry for Development Assistance of the Federal Republic of Germany, provided funds for basic equipment and staff training until 2002. I implemented what would later be called the "Archives for Traditional Music in Laos" (ATML), oversaw staff training, and conducted initial audiovisual area recordings and archiving in all provinces south of Vientiane. I also conducted detailed research and performed data analysis in the years following the implementation. I visited the provinces of Sekong and Salavan repeatedly with other staff members and for periods of at least two weeks in 2004, 2005, 2007, and 2009. Details on interviews and recordings are provided in the database of the ATML under the code numbers provided with the figure captions and these are listed in the appendix below. We conducted 249 recording sessions with 123 musicians aged between seventeen and seventy-seven. Furthermore, we were often accompanied by assistants from each district's Cultural Office, who provided us with useful information and helped us to find reliable informants.

We interviewed Alak, Tarieng, Nghe, and Katu people in Lao or Vietnamese depending on the educational background of our hosts. In general, those aged eight to twenty-five spoke Lao fluently. A few of them, as well as some elderly people we spoke to, had studied or worked in Vietnam. Nevertheless, there were large differences in the terminology used for musical instruments or their parts. We decided to keep the Lao translations they provided. This system was derived from applicable organological standards.[2] Our data collection will continue over the next few years to obtain a clear, broad picture of the changing situation within the southern provinces of Laos.

All sound recordings, which were made on high-quality Digital Audio Tape equipment, are archived and publicly accessible in the National Library of Laos and in the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv. All recordings are also accessible as high resolution WAV files to enable researchers to retrieve signals via software applications such as Adobe Audition, which can produce clear spectrograms and high resolution time lines. Audiovisual recordings support these sound recordings visually and are related to the sound recordings' code numbers. All transcriptions and spectrograms were designed by the author.

Terminology

The organology of musical instruments deals mainly with the tangible aspects of musical instruments such as the potential in sound production, the functionality of various elements, instrumental technology, playing techniques, and culturally identifiable repertoire captured in notation or recordings. Looking into the history of musical instruments as a scientific subject, their development as part

of material culture is most prevalent. Musical instruments have great significance for the identity and uniqueness of traditional musical practices. They are an element of intangible culture that can be defined in a very broad sense, for example, by Condominas (2004, 26) as an act of oral transmission of knowledge, or the more detailed description from unesco, which was modified slightly to fit the political instruments of the organization and to include, in a holistic way, cases that might be neglected. The modified definition of intangible cultural heritage is as follows:

> The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.
>
> (unesco 2003)

The question of whether an element that unesco tries to protect through applying its convention is primarily tangible or intangible is by no means answered. There are many cases that could fall into both tangible and intangible categories, especially the last two domains of cultural heritage mentioned in the convention consisting of "(d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship" (unesco 2003). Seen from this perspective, these musical instruments seem to hold a special position: they are unquestionably material objects used in the performing arts yet they also facilitate the transmission of knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. Most importantly, there is an inseparable connection between intangible culture and individuals, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes:

> It is not possible—or it is not as easy—to treat such manifestations as proxies for persons, even with recording technologies that can separate performances from performers and consign the repertoire to the archive.
>
> (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 60)

The terms "tangible" and "intangible" deserve some clarification. While most dictionaries define tangible and intangible as "palpable" versus "impalpable," the specific meaning of these terms in the context of the social sciences was widely discussed as the state of objects and their relation to society (Flipo 1988; Muller 2008; Cardao-Pito 2012). The outcome of this discussion has been the refined individualization of appraisals of tangible and intangible elements, and the extension of their application on objects and activities in dynamic processes. The indivisible duality of things and activities, objects and processes, of which cultures consist, is expressed through "tangible and intangible aspects" that emphasize a holistic perspective in the complexity of relations among the Alak and their environment.

The alak in sekong and salavan, laos

The approximately 16,600 (Sekong Indigenous People's Development Program 1997) Alak who live in Sekong and Salavan speak an Austro-Asiatic, Eastern Mon-Khmer language (Enfield 2004; Thongkum 1997; 2001). Socially, they are symbiotically connected to the Nghe, the Talieng, and the Western Katu due to the exchange of cattle and tools (Prachakij-Karacak et al. 1995). With the exception of 3 percent who are lowland Lao, the Alak, as well as the other people populating Sekong province, have lived for a long time in the border areas between larger societies who viewed them as uncivilized people (Condominas 1951; cerd 2005; Baird and Shoemaker 2007, 872). Historically, the strong features of dominant lowland civilizations were paddy rice cultivation, religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism, written languages and their literatures, centralized political orders, and diplomatic flexibility. The Alak have none of these features—they still focus on swidden agriculture (Bisht and Bankoti 2004, 17). Paddy rice production has been introduced in the last few years, but most of the Alak prefer the highland rice for its better taste. They practice animism and spiritualism in connection to their close relation to forests, mountains, and caves—places which, in the eyes of civilized lowlanders, are populated by spirits who serve as inspiration for black magic. The Alak are illiterate in their own language, and as individuals they do not take political orders beyond their villages.

These attributes helped the Alak to survive untouched through many territorial power changes until the last Indochina war. During that time, many of them were involved in the activities of the Pathet Lao who fought, together with the Vietnamese Liberation Front, against the French and American forces in the area alongside the Ho Chi Minh Trail that crossed Sekong province. Many Alak villages were built during wartime in support of the army infrastructure and remained intact after the war.

The Alak's first attempt to battle for "independence" marked the end of their independence from the lowland civilization. The road built from Mekong Highway No. 13 to Vietnamese Coastal Highway No. 1 through Alak territory brought increasing poverty and cultural pressure on many minorities of the mountainous areas of southern Laos (Baird and Shoemaker 2007, 869).

In response to new demand for consumer goods such as televisions, refrigerators, or motorcycles, some Alak sold their land shares to logging companies, who came soon after the road builders. They had to take out loans that they could not pay back unless they worked for the logging companies. Some of them even sold their cattle and starved as a result. All the most negative by-products of "civilization," such as the trafficking of children, prostitution, and the consumption and trade of drugs and alcohol have become social problems that the Alak, as well as the Tarieng, the Nghe, and the Katu, have had to live with in return for having roads, school houses, medical posts, and electricity.

The culture of rituals among the Alak

The Alak, as with some other Southeast Asian mainland cultures, have had to find a new social stability and understanding of their identity under these changing circumstances. They found their identity within their cultural traditions, especially in a more carefully cultivated calendar of rituals—rituals which may, as Bowie puts it, "channel and express emotions, guide and reinforce forms of behavior, support or subvert the status quo, bring about change, or restore harmony and balance" (Bowie 2006, 138). These are, in this context, important performative and transformative tools that restore the distinctiveness of communities in the face of imposed universalization.[3]

As with many other marginalized minorities of that area, social layers within the community were deconstructed and reconstructed through various social and economic changes. Most importantly, knowledge had become independent of life experience and was acquired instead through direct access to mass media such as radio, television, internet, and mobile telephone networks. Dealing with these communication tools requires a completely new set of intellectual skills only found among the younger generation that is more familiar with technology. Therefore, age-dependent knowledge hierarchies have changed within the community.

Thus, the last domain of inherited knowledge, capabilities, and practical experience is the spiritual and cultural tradition that remains in the hands of the village elders and some experienced specialists. They frequently conduct rituals such as offerings to various spirits in return for support in personal matters, and these seem to be favored over other means of problem solving.

Spirits are omnipresent in the traditional world view of the Alak. Each family, house, and community has good spirits. These spirits are not fixed in shape as they can transform from natural phenomenon—such as mist or dark shadows—into birds, human-like figures, or fruits. The same applies to bad spirits that are the result of individual and group misconduct or failure. To avoid their influence, good spirits are empowered through numerous rituals. Through talks with Alak musicians and singers carried out during the course of this research,[4] the names of rituals are individualized according to those that conduct them. Small rituals may involve the offering of a chicken, eggs, and rice, while other rituals demand the slaughtering of a pig. Larger rituals take several days and are composed of ritual sections with different offerings made by the parties involved. These rituals usually exclude strangers, and in such cases symbolic signs in the shape of an octagonal star made of bamboo leaves and willow mark the entry and the exit points of a village. Offerings are extended to include a large amount of rice wine, tobacco, weapons, and metal items.[5]

Modern times have brought further modifications to ritual offerings, especially the incorporation of items such as watches, transistor radios, and even mobile phones that can be offered in a larger ritual. The Alak define modernity not only in terms of technological goods but also in the sense that they could be produced anywhere in the world and their production does not connect producer and con-

sumer. Offerings of such items, therefore, are seen as a strong sign of modernity that challenges the Alaks' identity. Modernity[6] as a lived daily routine among the Alak denotes an unbalanced situation between cultural losses (such as ethnic distinctiveness through a leveling down to a general "minority" appearance within a newly-defined nation), and the benefit and comfort of modern communication tools, medicine, and formal education.

For those who face health risks at times such as childbirth or major surgery, the medical procedures are regularly accompanied by offerings such as the slaughtering of chickens and pigs according to special rules in front of those concerned. In order to fulfill the requirement of personal presence, rituals can take place in central hospitals far from a village or deep in a forest.

The agrarian calendar calls for further regular rituals that involve specialists and the entire community. Group and individual rituals, of which sympathetic and transmittable rituals based on animistic views (VAN GENNEP 2004, 9) are the most vivid and preservable, play an important role in this process of cultural self-defence and conservation. These rituals find their material representation in various buildings, tools, and artifacts—musical instruments among them—that carry distinct meanings.

Interestingly, so-called new instruments are perceived to belong to a different social layer of historical understanding. New instruments and modern technology bear a sign of arbitrariness that challenges ethnic identity and the uniqueness of local performance culture. The musical exchanges of the Alak with villagers from the Katu, Nghe, or Talieng communities are much more defined and less abstract than through transmitted cultural values encoded in strange musical instruments that cannot be related to the Alak's own history. The Alak, Katu, Nghe, or Talieng often perform together or unify their patterns of accompaniment (ATML code number 842–887). However, the individual identity of songs and dances is expressed solely through language differences or dialects and not through varying musical structures and ways of performance, as was the case before electricity became available. The possibility to technically reproduce music and dance may inevitably lead to uniformity in nonverbal performance elements such as music and dance. On the other hand, old instruments carry their meanings for the community through their special sound quality reproduced through playing techniques that were transmitted from generation to generation. The sound itself generates a meaning that communicates a cultural belonging and is a unique tool in conducting rituals.

The common interpretation of the Alaks' ritual practice as being purely animistic as described by BISHT and BANKOTI (2004, 17) and repeatedly seen in related literature (LUANGTHONGKUM 2010) is worth a closer look. In my observations among the Alak in Sekong and Salavan during the years 1999 and 2009,[7] the spirits called upon for help or for forgiveness do not correspond to those invoked in animism, where spirits are mostly multi-functional beings that can transform themselves or be transformed into diverse shapes, as discussed by SHELDRAKE (2009); roughly explained in defence of the term "animism" by HARVEY (2005, 28); or more differentiated by BIRD-DAVID (1999).

Beyond the personification of nonhuman organisms and objects, Alak emphasize the harmonizing of activities "in flow" and in relation to their environment rather than concentrating on a temporarily fixed shape or a definite representative spirit. Transition of animation seems to be an important element in the Alak's world view. In the system proposed by van Gennep, the Alak may be categorized as acting in non-exclusive dynamistic rituals (van Gennep 2004, 7). In examining the difference between ritual practices among the Alak and other groups covered by anthropologists working in the region, Bowie (2006) shows the broad diversity of world views and the resulting relationships between the Alak and specific objects such as musical instruments that is yet to be explored among some remote communities of mainland Southeast Asia. Other important contributions made in the second half of the twentieth century include those by Walker (1978; 1979), who described distinct ritual practices for the Lahu, and Lehman (1963) for the Chin (Kachin) in mainland Southeast Asia, as well as Condominas (1951) on the ethnic groups of Eastern Indochina. These studies dealt with the differences in societal structures related to rituals, though not explicitly with sound-producing objects and the meanings of sound.

Among the Alak, and with reference to the list of musicians and singers given in the appendix, it is believed that sound keeps the spirits transcendent and transformable, which says something about the role of music and movement in rituals that are mostly initiated by shamans in the context of healing and fortune-telling. In the wider context of the community, shamans act in the background. They advise the elderly on how to correctly conduct ceremonies, and this depends on the actual situation, a situation that must be discussed in advance of the ritual event. Ceremonies consisting of a set of different rituals and addressed to the entire world of the Alak that includes the people themselves, their ancestors, and their family spirits therefore differ according to each case. Traditionally, a division of ritual acts according to different tasks and addressees is clearly understood and practiced (Sivilay, personal communication, 4 April 2001).[8]

The analysis and evaluation of audiovisual and sound material delivered by Bryceson and Prentice (2011) creates a possibility to partly compare historically different moments of life in Alak communities and allows for deeper insights into recent developments regarding the meanings of musical instruments. Bryceson and Prentice sent their recordings to the ATML in 2011. They were members of a medical team under the Colombo Plan[9] who worked in that area between 1961 and 1963, and they used 8mm film with separate audio channels. These recordings have helped to extend the overview of cultural developments that took place in the context of the Second Indochina War.[10] The staff of the ATML who regularly go[11] with me for fieldwork to remote areas are in steady contact with collectors, informants, and musicians that contributed to this study.

Firsthand observations over a time span of ten years suggest that the Alak developed from a culture that *includes* rituals to a culture *of* rituals. While in the past rituals were held primarily without reference to Alak ethnic identity, today ritual acts are the tools to consciously reinforce identity and uniqueness in the context

of a larger society. The emphasis given to active rituals in their intangible sense may also result because tangible manifestations of spiritual life disappear through changing living conditions. While only fifty years ago all Alak longhouses were crowned by a buffalo horn on each end of the roof to stop evil spirits from landing (Bryceson and Prentice 2011), modern single houses have mostly corrugated iron roofs without further decoration. Missing representative objects, meanings, and ideas appear to need more attention.

Musical instruments and their meanings

Alak musical performances and movements, nearly without exception, use musical instruments such as gongs, bells, struck tubes (slit drums), double headed cylindrical drums, and recently the *khen* (mouth organ), the *kachappi* (lute), and the *so* (spike fiddle), which were introduced by the Lao lowlanders during the Second Indochina War.

The arrival of new instruments relegated those instruments used until then to the category of "old instruments." "Old," however, did not imply a lower quality. Instead, the category served to recontextualize music practiced in terms of the then-experienced tradition, with the meaning of the music not being strictly bound to traditions such as songs derived from external sources or songs invented on the spot.

"New" instruments

New instruments were very rare before 1961. Only those villages close to the settlements of the Lao lowlanders in Salavan, the then-modern administration center of Salavan province, or some agricultural processing centers on the Boloven Plateau, where Lao lowlanders held important positions and lived with their families, had access to these new instruments (Bryceson and Prentice 2011; group interview with the musicians Vanthong, Uy, and Sivilay in Ban Mo, Sekong, April 2000).

Later observations in 2001 confirmed not only the wide distribution of new instruments even in remote villages, but also showed that in some places they were already modified and reconstructed. With the new instruments, entertainment specialists came into being who were called whenever the situation demanded it. They became the first "musicians" whose repertoire reached beyond the average knowledge and skill of the others. Though music for entertainment already existed in accordance with special tasks during ceremonies and rituals, "musicianship" independent of an occasion or formal duty was part of "modern times." In contrast to what these "musicians" do, the playing of old instruments is based on a musical understanding and the permanently experienced sound ideal that can be produced by all (mostly male) members of the community, with very few exceptions (personal communication with the musicians Bunkhai, Bunthiam, Sonnali, Sommani, Sengchan, and Sekong, April 2001).

Though women are not excluded from practicing music—they sing and drum occasionally—most of them consider playing instruments to be a time consuming and often exhausting activity. Unlike those from other communities such as the

FIGURE 1. A set of "new" instruments as used by minority communities in southern Laos: the lute *kachappi*, the spike fiddle *so*, and the 7-foot mouthorgan *khen* (Photo: ATML, 2007).

FIGURE 2. Deceased family member depicted with a *kachappi* as an attribute of musicianship. (Photo: ATML, 2007).

FIGURE 3. A self-built spike fiddle (*so*) used in Ban Mo by the musician Sedon, Sekong, to entertain guests, related to ATML code no. 852 (Photo: ATML, 2001).

FIGURE 4. Alak flat gongs (Photo: ATML, 2007).

FIGURE 5. Ritual bell (*kaling*) used by the Alak and Katu as attachments to their shields during the warrior dance (Photo: ATML, 2001).

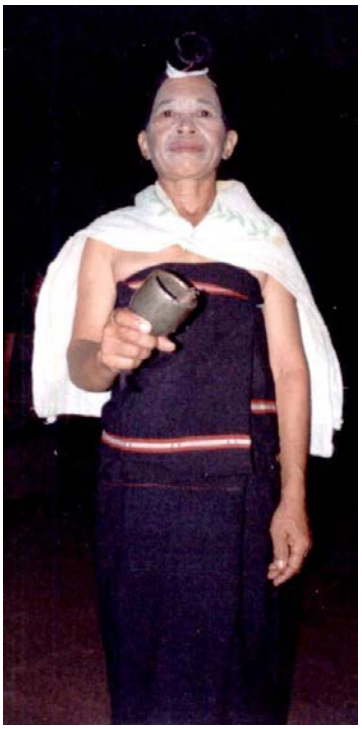

FIGURE 6. An Alak woman shaking a large-sized bell during responsorial singing (Photo: ATML, 2001).

FIGURE 7. This photo was taken during the resettlement of an Alak village in 1978—only the ringing shields are used (Photo: Sivilay, 1978/ATML, 2001).

Khmer or Hmong, Alak women are not excluded from playing instruments due to taboos or other social restrictions.

The new instruments embody the spirit of progress and communality in different ways.[12] They are made from different materials using tubes or wooden plates in different sizes, and metal tongues and metal strings that produce different pitches, and together they shape a modern, multipart sound,[13] disseminated through media such as television.

The implied meaning of the sound of the new instrument is completely different from that which it had in its community of origin. The Lao mouth organ, for example, is usually played in the manner of a drone instrument that harmonically supports a melody. The drone pitches may change when playing a melody to follow a given harmonic scheme and its interpretation through the melody. The drones come with a specific rhythmic pattern shaping an underlying "groove" (Miller 1985; Nettavong 2002). Among the Alak musicians, the mouth organ is used to produce a "thick" sound as an amplification of a song melody (according to musician Vanthong, interviewed in 2000). Harmonic progressions or pitch changes of the drones are not considered necessary though they are well known in the context of songs performed by Lao lowlanders.

As musical instruments adopted from a supposedly higher civilization, both the Lao *khen* and the *kachappi* seem to be significantly more important than musical instruments observed among the neighboring people, such as the Oi or Katu, who have their own different versions of a mouth organ and a *kachappi* (Jähnichen 2001, 202–14).[14] On the other hand, without the knowledge of other mouth organs or lutes, the Lao *khen* or the *kachappi* could not have been so easily adopted by the Alak. The question of why they were introduced as instruments from the Lao lowlanders rather than through exchange with their traditional neighbors deserves closer attention. The situation during wartime had a strong impact on the Alak community in terms of adapting to new social hierarchies (Bryceson and Prentice 2011; Errington 1989, 139). Military structures and patterns of communication changed the perception of existing behavior in interethnic exchanges among the Alak. The recognition of a group superior to them might not have been based on knowledge of this group's achievements. Rather, the simple fact that the strangers came from a distance that most of the Alak would never have traveled in their entire lives made the strangers admirable and their musical instruments desirable. Attracting attention with their sound, the new instruments were taken up and used in the new context of evening entertainment—a use encouraged by the presence of the strangers themselves on these occasions. While in the past, traditional storytelling or game songs had dominated the Alak's leisure time, instrumental music that required no linguistic competence increased in popularity during the war (Sivilay, personal communication, 30 April 2001). Thus, new instruments played an important role in cultural transmission because they helped to introduce both the Lao language as well as patterns of Lao entertainment to the Alak.

To the present day, the new instruments are also played in traditional settings. The function of these instruments in ritual contexts is to frame the acts in a man-

ner consistent with the ritual so that they join ballads, traditional storytelling, and dance music strictly as musical instruments, without being empowered to be in direct communication with spirits.

"Old" instruments

Gongs and bells (*kong*[15] and *kaling*; see FIGURES 4 and 5) are of utmost importance to mainly big rituals conducted within and addressed to the entire community. Though they are owned by the whole village they can be used only with the permission of the village council. The importance of keeping the spirits transformable becomes evident when one observes the use of gongs and bells. During singing time in the evenings, the leading storyteller, who can be a woman or a man, swings a bell forward and backward to indicate the steady flow of rhythms to which other community members respond. Without the bell, the story cannot be properly told (FIGURE 6). The back of the shields bear a small bell that sounds as the carrier walks around the main place. In earlier days, during a ceremony for moving the village to another site (FIGURE 7), the horn and drums were not used, but the shields with the ringing bells were.

The drums are owned by the community and stored in the communal house and can be accessed anytime by anybody (FIGURE 8). In the past, and at least before 1961, they were used for processions and for other group movements in rituals to indicate tempo and dynamics. The drum hangs from a pole resting on the shoulders of two men, one in front of the other. The man at the rear beats the drum with a short wooden mallet while walking with the crowd. At present, drums are not only used for rituals, especially since the new instruments are widely played. Instrumental dance music is increasingly accompanied by simple drum patterns in a typical Lao lowlander's style (notation designed by author):

In contrast to the Lao lowlanders who use their palms to beat their drums, Alak, Katu, and Ta Oi use short wooden mallets to play their drums in the context of entertainment as well as during rituals.

Old instruments, however, are not restricted to ritual use. One interesting game in which gongs are involved is the conventional expression of communality. The game requires musicians to create a regular rhythmic pattern with pleasing variations while they circle around a fire, a lamp, or a jar of rice wine. As the musicians beat the gongs and the tube, all with short wooden mallets, someone—usually a woman—serves each one a drink as she sings good wishes. The three musicians have to continue playing without interruption even as they imbibe their drink (FIGURE 9). If one of them gets out of rhythm, he has to be replaced by another man.

The tangibility of the old instruments is the dominant feature in this situation. They have to be carried around, beaten in rhythm, and presented as implements

FIGURE 8. Alak drums stored in the communal house (Photo: ATML, 2001).

for the game. The non-ritual situation returns a "solidity" to the instruments' use within the community. The game is not bound to the "intangibility" of rules and taboos representing world views celebrated in rituals. However, even in this more material situation, intangible aspects are clearly defined, such as the demand for a continuous flow of sound. Important in the context of Alak rituals is that the struck tube that adds a regular pulse to the composition is responsible for keeping the friendly spirits transcendent. Leaving out this regular beat can create a critical situation for the audience who, according to the village elders, might see the spirits in various shapes.

Thus, games and music are inseparable from rituals. They not only frame large rituals, but also create the right atmosphere of communality. The event known as a "ritual" or the context known as a "ritual context" is only applicable when seen from one single perspective, mostly the perspective of the researchers themselves. In social practice, the Alak perceive their rituals as events that grow from daily routine and its immediate demands, and thus performative transitions take place without sharp boundaries that distinguish between common and ritual behavior. Only the core act itself becomes distinct through the significance given by the community or individuals of the community (BOWIE 2006). Seen from this perspective, some thoughts on ritual spheres as discussed by BOSCO (2004, 232) come to mind that may help to define intangible spaces of ritual meanings within real spaces of non-ritual activities.

MUSIC FOR A SINGLE GONG

The most striking feature of Alak ritual music is its use of a single gong for mutual communication with the spirits. This performance is restricted to the few persons concerned and has to be carefully prepared.

The flat gong is played with both hands—the right hand holds a wooden mallet, which is padded with rubber or other material at one end. The left arm keeps the gong suspended while the left hand is used to mute certain overtones or the entire sound by touching certain areas of the gong. This technique is applied to a special rhythmic structure that complements the beats with the right hand. The

FIGURE 9. An Alak game with flat gongs and a struck tube (Photo: ATML, 2001).

sound seems rhythmically free but is not. If we count all applied combinations of movements, we find ten to twelve symmetric or in-line shapes that vary in density and intensity and can be summarized in macro patterns. Additionally, the musician moves the gong forward and backward thus causing slight pitch changes, which are purposely introduced as subtle variations. The most important feature is the creation of non-repetitive patterns (Uy, personal communication, 30 March 2001).[16] Therefore only experienced persons are capable of communicating with the spirits. Each phrase has to be connected with the next phrase in such a way that the "idea" of a steady flow using varying rhythmic structures created through the use of different beat and mute techniques goes on uninterruptedly. The audiovisual material examined shows the technique described. The closing of the gong session is illustrated in FIGURE 11.

In the upper part of the spectrogram taken from the same example, the highest layer represents cicadas; the sound of the cicadas has an additional meaning in the performance—their sound is integrated into the whole scheme of things. It is believed that the cicadas watch over the night spirits. During the course of the ritual, the spirits who are called then answer open questions and guide the person who called for them down the right path. Disregarding the cicadas' contribution would be disrespectful not only to the cicadas, but also to the spirits.

This approach might indicate that the musical instrument used is understood to be an integral part of a whole—that is, it does not exist by itself but only in certain environmental settings in which nature and human performance are two significant features. To work out a successful ritual, all these parts have to be correct, especially during the passage from one condition to the other, from sound to quietness, from movement to rest.

The playing of a single flat gong is one of the few performances not practiced by everybody. Only some experienced men of the community are able to create meaningful communication and conduct the ritual in the right way. However, the usual system, which specifies what is right when playing a single flat gong, has been affected by changes that have taken place in the last fifty years.

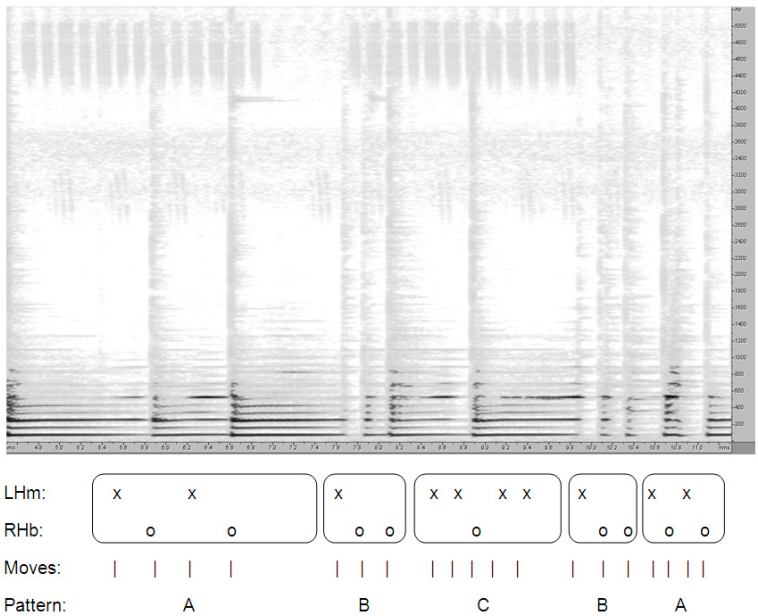

FIGURE 10: Excerpt from a single gong playing; a symmetric macro pattern in a call for a spirit. (LHm = left hand mutes; RHb = right hand beats). Recording by the author for ATML, 3 April 2001 (ATML Code-No. 841).

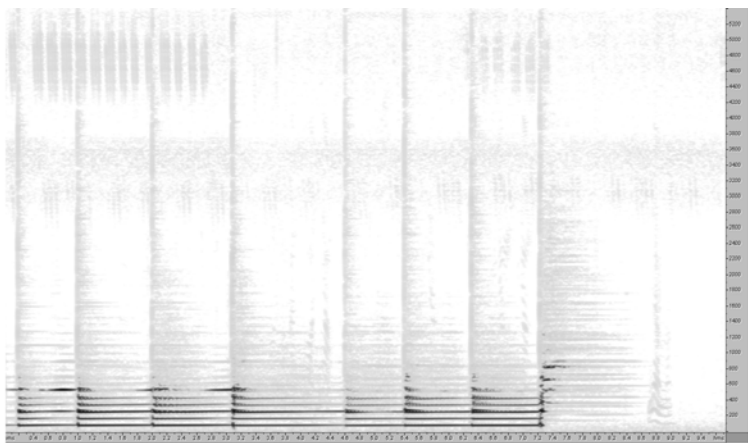

FIGURE 11: The end of a gong session; the cicadas' sound interrupts, and simultaneous beating with the right and muting with the left hand closes the session. Recording by the author for ATML, 3 April 2001 (ATML Code-No. 841).

A NEW CULTURE OF RITUALS

The newly-revived ritual practice among the Alak in Sekong and Salavan is often misunderstood by Lao lowlanders and their political elite as a tendency to return to a superstitious past, ignoring modern social communication, progress in technology, and medical aid, as well as modern ways of interethnic cooperation. In the light of resettlement programs (BAIRD and SHOEMAKER, 2007), the new culture of rituals may strengthen the solidarity among the community members and the group identity that is necessary to protect the land, forest, and spiritual spaces of the Alak villages.

Seen from the Alaks' perspective, the way of keeping rituals alive requires much more creativity in times of rapid social, economic, and demographic changes than just continuing with age-old ceremonies for lack of other alternatives. Unlike in the past, nearly all people of the villages now know details about the ritual calendar, the rules governing the rituals, and the hierarchical structure that controls ritual knowledge in the community.

Through comparison with the advantages of modernity—at least as far as they could experience them—Alak people have become experts at returning to traditional virtues. The reason why is obvious—it took less than a decade to observe in detail both the disadvantages and rewards brought by modernity[17] and affiliation with a superior power represented by the state, and to balance costs against benefits. As Kwang-Ok puts it with regard to Korean communities, the Alak were partly reinventing rituals in order to resist the modernization that destroys ecological essentials and the environment (KIM 2004, 271).

Becoming a specialist in traditional virtues requires a knowledge of musical instruments and their meaning both for rituals and also for purely entertainment purposes. Thus the performing arts undergo a recategorization that is yet to be discussed within Alak communities. The gap between the modern attributes of life, such as the ownership of durable consumer goods, communication technology, and medicine produced outside of their world, and the understanding of quality of life and mental freedom challenges the ritual practices of the Alak communities in many ways. Aiming to reestablish control over their daily lives, Alak communities have to seek more answers and ask more questions of their spirits, while the growing intensity with which these exchanges occur is musically expressed in different ways. Ritual acts, which are currently endangered and embodied in and connected to certain musical instruments, make these instruments more than tangible items of Alak heritage; they become bearers of intangible culture. They undoubtedly symbolize the spiritual inclusion of ritual acts into the culture of the community. Thus the symbolic value of a musical instrument increases, and the relationship between the instrument as a physical object and as an idea that has symbolic meaning changes as a reaction to contemporary pressures. Consequently, the intangible attributes of musical instruments become part of a cultural strategy to defend the self-definition of Alak communities. This strategy might be called "spiritual inclusion" as musical instruments are increasingly used for both their

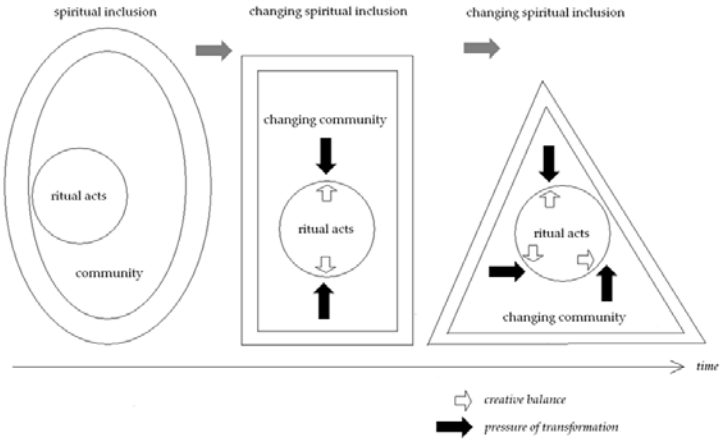

FIGURE 12: A scheme demonstrating the changing community (among others, through modern technologies, different knowledge maintenance, and environmental issues that limit exchange levels with the outer world from open [round] to a decreasing number of possibilities) and the necessary "creativity" in balancing ritual acts and adjusting spiritual inclusion to ensure communal stability (idea and design by the author).

tangible and intangible qualities in the process of balancing ritual acts within a changing community.

In the past, as part of the dowry, gongs and bells were used as trading goods in many parts of mainland Southeast Asia. Production as well as the act of exchange were immediately connected to the material and ideological context of communities sharing a wider living area and a "cultural market." The tangible aspect therefore represented an intangible value, and vice versa. In recent times, these goods have been traded in different ways to people who neither know their meaning nor value the traditional implication of exchange. Tourists from all over the world and professional collectors of Asian antiques are the main customers (YAMASHITA and EADES 2003, 247). The separation of the tangible item from its intangible cultural value provokes broad discussion, mostly ending up in resignation. "The new spirit called 'Mammon' becomes more and more worshipped" (Sivilay, personal communication, 31 March 2001).

Nonetheless, this development has made those very discussions seem part of an "intangible culture" among the Alak and their neighbors. An increasing awareness of communal rights regarding cultural properties might not be the worst outcome of the developments in the last decade. Though communication patterns change steadily and irreversibly, musical instruments cannot be replaced in rituals by other means. By the same token, rituals cannot be universalized or transformed to a general level without ignoring the meaning of musical instruments, their specific function, and the intangible knowledge that is the Alaks' conception of their world as revealed in the way their instruments are used.

Notes

1. Something is tangible if it can be perceived by the sense of touch, identified and realized by the mind, and appraised at an actual or approximate value, whereas intangibility is bound to a doing, a performance, or a service that can be perceived but that is not palpable, although it has actual meaning and becomes part of memory. Both the intangible and tangible aspects of musical instruments complement each other in regards to their functionality within a community.

2. The organology of musical instruments draws mainly on the Hornbostel and Sachs (1986) system that classifies instruments solely according to the principle of sound production. It is the most applicable system in an area of dense cultural diversity because it does not apply various criteria of classification that may confuse or contradict each other. Nevertheless, the internal system within the cultures observed may strongly differ and has to be considered in database entries as well as in fieldwork descriptions (Kartomi 1990).

3. Universalization here refers to the contextual leveling in a regional (direct communication area) or global (transmitted through mass media) context regarding commodities, intangible values such as knowledge, or performing arts. Waters (1996) analyzes universalization under the auspices of human rights.

4. Unless specific individual information is given by a single person, we consider all interviews and talks made with the musicians and singers that are audiovisually captured in the "Archives for Traditional Music in Laos" (ATML) under their respective code numbers and publicly accessible as sources of information. It would not be precise to call upon single informants when collecting information from a group of people that were regularly visited and questioned while using different means of translation. The list of 123 musicians and singers consulted as well as the respective ATML code numbers are given in the appendix.

5. Recently, strangers have not been completely excluded. They may watch the ritual from a distance and take part in the festivities following the main act, such as the sinking of the coffin in the earth apart from the village. Then they return with the ritual procession to the communal house.

6. Here, the concept of modernity represents the perception of the last time period within the Alak community. "Modern times" refers to the period following the introduction of electric power along new roads (Sivilay, personal communication, 2001) that began around 1998.

7. These observations were the result of numerous interviews and talks that I recorded assisted by the ATML staff (see appendix).

8. Sivilay was a member of the local support team in Attapeu and Sekong. He was chosen by the Province Offices for Information and Culture due to his comprehensive knowledge of various languages.

9. The Colombo Plan was a British Commonwealth scheme providing technical assistance in remote areas of Southeast Asia. Anthony Bryceson and Colin Prentice, the local team of doctors, took photographs, shot film, and recorded sound in various villages and small towns. Their audio recordings are part of the collections stored in the Archive of Traditional Music in Laos at the National Library in Vientiane, the final outcome of a long-term project conducted by a team I led.

10. The Second Indochina War is commonly known as the Vietnam War and took place in Indochina from 1954–1973 (Turley, 2009).

11. I usually visit the National Library and the ATML once a year for a couple of weeks to transfer funding, to conduct fieldwork with the staff, to maintain equipment and carriers, and to conduct further research.

12. Communality is used in the context of interethnic networks and their reflection within a rather mono-ethnic group. It goes beyond the village borders and yet is part of intra-ethnic relationships that are expressed, for example, in hierarchies regarding knowledge access.

13. This modern, multipart sound refers to a sound ideal deriving from diatonically improved folk musical instruments distributed mainly via mass media. For example, the tuning of the mouth organ tubes that is reinterpreted as a diatonic scale expressed in fundamental bass lines and played on additional Western instruments.

14. The mouth organ is called a *dur* among the Oi. It comes in a set of two, and consists of a short and a very long mouth organ. A counter-gourd is placed on the drone pipe.

15. When borrowed from another village these are also called *kong pe prai*.

16. Uy is a thirty-year-old gong player and is considered to be the most talented from Mo village, Sekong Province.

17. The wide variety of uses of the term "modernity" in the social sciences does not allow for a detailed and comprehensive exploration in this article.

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Appendix

This is a list of musicians and singers recorded by the author and the ATML staff (talks, interviews, performances). Usually our informants use only one name; in very few cases the complete name was obtained in informal situations. Following the name, in most cases the age at the time of the first meeting and gender information is given.

These main informants are represented in the following fully documented recordings of the ATML: 133–143, 327–335, 782–812, 841–871, 876–887, 1804–1829, 2203–2224, 2273–2302.

1. Amphon (80, f)
2. Athit Phan Ek (m)
3. Aton (20, m)
4. Au (40, m)
5. Ayabo (57, f)
6. Boun (48, m)
7. Bounlieng (60, f)
8. Bounlith Chanthakaly (60, m)
9. Bounlong Senkham (32, m)
10. Bounthan Chanthakaly (57, m)
11. Bounthieng Chanthachon (51, m)
12. Bunkhai (40, m)
13. Bunkhan (65, m)
14. Bunkoet Sommani (56, m)
15. Bunlong Senkham (32, m)
16. Bunta Duangpanyathip (77, m)
17. Bunta (70, m)
18. Buntem (47, m)
19. Buntem (57, f)
20. Bunthan Nonmamy (43, f)
21. Bunthiam (43, m)
22. Chan Khunlapoasa (39, f)
23. Chanhoi (52, m)
24. Chanloi (52, m)
25. Chanthong (39, m)
26. Chuaioeua (70, m)
27. Chumsy Sipasoet (55, f)
28. Daokon Duangpanya (35, m)
29. Duangchan Phonphettavan (50, f)
30. Duangta (35, m)
31. Hatsadong Xaphakdy (19, f)
32. Heng (60, m)
33. Hongthong Lidetmunson (47, m)
34. Ia (f)
35. Inpan Basy (27, m)
36. Khammi Silaphon (m)
37. Khammi (18, f)
38. Khammun (43, m)
39. Khammy Silamphon (25, f)
40. Khamphan Meuansitthida (54, m)
41. Khamphet (50, m)
42. Khamphi (35, m)
43. Khamphian Khunlapoasa (20, m)
44. Khampian (42, m)
45. Khamtan Phanthalat (63, m)
46. Ki (47, m)
47. Kiang (18, m)
48. Kiansay Keobounpheng (37, m)
49. Kongdeuan Nettavong (57, f)
50. Kosa Xaphakdy (15, m)
51. Liam (19, m)
52. Loem (33, m)
53. Long (28, m)
54. Mae (60, m)
55. Meuang (80, f)
56. Neuang (65, f)
57. Noe (29, m)
58. Nukham (37, m)

59. Nulia (18, m)
60. Nuphai Sipasoet (40, m)
61. Oakhom Keotongta (22, m)
62. Onta Butsady (60, m)
63. Oudom Keomalakham (55, m)
64. Pen (65, m)
65. Phaivan (m)
66. Phatsamon (45, m)
67. Phonheng (49, m)
68. Saman Suvannasy (67, m)
69. Saman Suvannasy (68, m)
70. Sangkhan Keongoenphet (19, f)
71. Saopha (38, m)
72. Saykham Basy (45, m)
73. Sedon (40, m)
74. Sengbun (34, m)
75. Sengchan (48, m)
76. Sengphet (m)
77. Sennuan (60, m)
78. Sibu (42, m)
79. Sithong (33, m)
80. Sithong (53, f)
81. Sivilay Noipanya (47, m)
82. Sivilay (34, m)
83. Somdy Luangnitkon (52, m)
84. Somlot Anongsak (57, m)
85. Sommani (39, m)
86. Somneuk (35, m)
87. Somphong Saynakhon (m)
88. Sompinoi (m)
89. Sonmai (56, m)
90. Sonnali (40, m)
91. Suban Vongat (f)
92. Sudon (37, m)
93. Suk (17, f)
94. Suksamay Basy (50, m)
95. Ulinyavongxay (m)
96. Sulinyong Senkham (36, m)
97. Suphi Phanmany (48, m)
98. Taniludoe (45, m)
99. Thonglay (47, f)
100. Thongpha (64, m)
101. Thongvan (55, m)
102. Toey Bunpheng (50, m)
103. Tuma (35, m)
104. Unheuan Phommachan (49, m)
105. Uy (30, m)
106. Vansay (40, m)
107. Vanthong (39, f)
108. Vila Sivat (59, m)
109. Vina (30, m)
110. Vina (40, f)
111. Visith Sopasoet (55, m)

The recordings and related audiovisual material can be retrieved on site at the National Library of Laos, Nam Phou, Vientiane, Lao PDR; and at the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, Arnimallee 27, 14195 Berlin, Germany.