



## Voices of the Wind

Voices of the Wind:  
Traditional Instruments in Laos  
Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC),  
Luang Prabang, Laos  
September 2018 – September 2020  
[www.taeclaos.org](http://www.taeclaos.org)

With its 50 officially identified ethnic groups, the landlocked state of Laos is one of the most ethnically diverse countries of mainland Southeast Asia. The musical cultures of its different ethnic groups is rich, varied, and in a constant state of flux. Instruments are an important part of the musical landscape of Laos, with their variety of roles, techniques, and timbres. Some are shared (often in different forms) by several ethnic groups, and others are more specific to a region or a few communities only.

While the guitar and the electric keyboard are very popular in Laos, it is the traditional aerophones that are celebrated in TAEC's newest exhibition: 'Voices of the Wind: Traditional Instruments in Laos'. The aerophones (commonly called 'wind instruments') form the most varied instrument family in Laos. They include the emblematic mouth organ *khaen*, but also the *dadoula* (a flute), the *tchudu* (a trumpet), and even simple leaves. They are used in festive, ritual and courting contexts, or simply to break loneliness. TAEC's exhibition explores different context of the music performances, the techniques of producing instruments and playing them, along with the different materials – modern and traditional – used to create sound. These different themes show the deep connection between music, nature, and everyday life, and the complexity and variety of voices of the wind in Laos.

### Promoting and celebrating musical cultures in Laos

The deceptively simple-looking wind instruments have generally been overlooked as an important part of Laos' cultural heritage, until now. The rapid economic and social changes taking place in the country have drastically changed the mechanisms of transmission of oral cultural practices, such as music. Young people have better access to education (a positive development) or leave the village for work, spending less time with elders performing traditional music. Further, instrument-makers are often old and no longer have apprentices. Once an instrument breaks, it is difficult to find someone able to repair it. Finally, changes in social mores also deeply influence the use of traditional instruments, as most young people regard the use of music for courting as old-fashioned. TAEC's music project aims to promote these instruments and their musicians, and support the safeguarding of their knowledge so they will remain accessible to future generations. The project is divided into three phases: 1. the documentation of

traditional wind instruments; 2. the creation of an exhibition at TAEC; 3. The dissemination of the collected data to the research communities.

The 'Voices of the Wind' exhibition was designed to highlight the variety and complexity of traditional wind instruments of Laos. It is accessible to a large audience, from the visitor eager to learn more about local culture, to the musician researching specific musical techniques. For example, many instruments of the region are used to communicate, either symbolically or directly, by mimicking tones of the spoken language. This exhibition uses audio-visual examples to make this complex phenomenon more accessible.

Through recreations of a Hmong instrument-maker's workshop and the staging of a Tai Dam healing ceremony, as well as interactive video kiosks with over a hundred pictures and videos recorded by the TAEC team, the visitor is invited to experience music in its traditional and daily context; to witness celebrations, ceremonies, and everyday life rarely seen by the general public.

### Ethical and sustainable issues

Two years of research in northern Laos – the most ethnically varied region of the country – were necessary to create the exhibition. During fieldtrips, curator Dr Marie-Pierre Lisssoir and the TAEC team interviewed musicians, singers, and instrument-makers of Kmhmu, Lu Mien, Oma, Tai Lue, Hmong, Lahu, Kui Luang, Tai Dam, and Akha ethnic groups. Music was filmed, photographed and recorded in its traditional context. About 50 instruments were collected (30 of which are displayed in the exhibition) in a sustainable and ethical way: the team always made sure that the instrument was not an heirloom, and that several others remained available in the village. In fact, most of the instruments were custom

ordered from local instrument-makers. In line with safeguarding musical instruments' practice and production, the actual crafting of several instruments, such as the Hmong mouth organ *qeej* (one week of work) or the *dadoula* flute of Lahu (cut from a bamboo in a few minutes), was also filmed and documented.

### Passing and giving back musical knowledge

This music project goes beyond the exhibition, as the TAEC team wishes to share with the communities that participated in the project. Therefore, after the opening of the 'Voices of the Wind' exhibition in September 2018, the TAEC team started a dissemination project, to compile and bring the documentation materials and recorded music back to the communities from which they were collected. At the time of writing, the team is visiting the main villages in which fieldtrips took place; setting up pop-up exhibitions of traditional music in Laos, screening videos recorded during the research trips, and organising small performances of local musicians. DVDs and mini SD cards with audio and video recordings will be given to key members of the villages (head of the villages, teachers, etc.), as well as a booklet in the Lao language, with 70 pages of text and photos collected in 15 villages. An archive of traditional music, all the interviews and recordings collected during the research,

is accessible to local and foreign visitors in the TAEC library in Luang Prabang. The videos and pictures in the exhibition are accessible online on the TAEC website. The main goal of this dissemination phase is not so much to teach people about local music, but to

promote and celebrate this music and its actors. Organising the exhibitions in the villages, with panels, videos, instruments from different ethnic groups to try, and performances of local musicians, invites villagers to share about music, to exchange experiences, stories, and knowledge.

Left: Notice the amplifier of the free reed Hmong pipe or *raj nplaim* (pronounced *tja plai*). Traditionally the amplifier would be made of bamboo, but it can also be modified with a plastic bottle. Top right: Mr. Haeyeu, an Akha musician, playing a buffalo horn called *tchudu*. The instrument is traditionally played to communicate messages, but some can also be used in healing ceremonies. Homsai village, Luang Namtha Province. 2017. Above: The music dissemination project in Ban Nayang Tai, January 2019. All photos ©TAEC.

Speaking about music is speaking about life in Laos, its changes and challenges. More than singing, musical instruments are directly influenced by the changes in local traditions and the musical practices related to them. While some instruments disappear, others are refashioned and adapted to the availability of new materials. It is not unusual to find an empty paint can transformed into the resonant chamber of a lute, or a plastic bottle used as an amplifier. TAEC's exhibition celebrates these changes as well as the voices of traditions.

Marie-Pierre Lisssoir, researcher at TAEC and curator of the 'Voices of the Wind' exhibition. Marie-Pierre Lisssoir is a Belgian ethnomusicologist working in Laos. She obtained her PhD in 2016 from the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium) and the Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3 (France). Her dissertation was titled *The Khap Tai Dam, Categorization and Musical Models: Ethnomusicological Study in Tai Populations from Highlands in Laos*.

About TAEC The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) is a social enterprise based in Luang Prabang Laos. The project is engaged in a broad range of museum and community engagement activities, reflecting its commitment to supporting living ethnic minority communities to preserve and promote their cultural heritage while looking towards the future. In addition to its permanent exhibition encompassing traditions and handicrafts of minority groups in Laos, the exhibition 'Voices of the Wind' will be on display until September 2020.

### Notes

- 1 The 'Voices of the Wind: Traditional Instruments in Laos' research and dissemination project was supported by the U.S. Embassy Vientiane and U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation.