

Changing Role of *Pi*, a Bamboo Sound-producing Tool, in the *Bon Chot* ritual of the Lua-mal in Nan Province, Northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The people called Lua-mal, living in the mountains of Nan Province, Northern Thailand, hold the *Bon Chot* ritual every August to entertain and strengthen the soul of rice grown in a dry field. During the ritual period, the soul of the rice is invited from the dry field, while villagers march in the village, beating *Pi*, a bamboo sound-producing tool, to entertain the soul of rice in expectation of a good harvest. The *Pi* can be beaten only during the ritual period and only within a village. *Pi* is a sound-producing tool for religious purposes, rather than a musical instrument used in an ordinary music performance; it is connected to the villagers' life in nature. However, the role of *Pi* may change in the future, becoming a musical instrument for enjoyment, as the sociocultural economy of the Lua-mal changes. In recent years, with the demand for biofuel, corn has increasingly become a commercial, rather than subsistence crop for the Lua-mal. If rice production declines, the role of *Pi* to entertain the soul of rice may be lost, and *Pi* may exist only as a musical instrument for an audience, and no longer limited to the specific ritual period or inside the village. It may even be used to attract and entertain tourists.

Keywords: Lua-mal people, Bamboo sound-producing tool, Soul of rice, *Bon Chot* ritual

INTRODUCTION

In Southeast Asia, many kinds of bamboo instruments are used in daily life, with a variety of purposes, including as containers, farming tools, and musical instruments.

In this paper, I focus on the bamboo sound-producing tool called *Pi*, which is beaten in the *Bon Chot* ritual¹, with the purpose of entertaining and strengthening the soul of rice grown in a dry field, held by the Lua-Mal people living in the mountainous area of Nan Province, Northern Thailand.

I conducted research on this ritual held every August in Toei Klang village in Pua District, Nan Province in 2010, 2011, and 2013. During the ritual period, *Pi* is beaten only in the *Bon Chot* ritual and only inside the village, for entertaining the soul of rice.

I describe the process of the ritual, and analyze the role of *Pi* in this ritual. *Pi* is sometimes introduced as a bamboo musical instrument. Jittreebut analyzes the structure and sound of *Pi* using an ethno-musicological approach. He describes *Pi* as a 'musical instrument' as a matter of course (Jittreebut, 2000). However, I hesitate to categorize it as a 'musical instrument', but prefer to call it a 'sound-producing tool' following Tsuge, because its character is different from a musical instrument used for entertainment among people. Tsuge proposes that the tools that aim

to produce sound, including what is usually called a 'musical instrument', should be called 'sound-producing tools' generically, because the definition of 'musical instrument' is different among cultures and changeable, depending on the purpose and usage of producing sound (Tsuge, 1991).

In Southeast Asia, many kinds of bamboo 'musical instruments' exist. However, while some produce sound, they are not necessarily intended to perform music. For example, *Baling-bing* of the Kalinga people in the Philippines is used for threatening snakes or evil spirits en route to the fields. Its aim is similar to the sound-producing tool farmers in Northern Thailand and Northern Lao PDR use to drive animals away from the fields (Lindel et al., 1982; Takahashi et al., 2008). In Southeast Asia, bamboo tools that produce sounds, but are not used to perform music, play an important role in the life of farmers.

Pi, which is made of bamboo and entertains and strengthens the soul of rice grown in a dry field, is connected with the life in nature of the Lua-Mal people. However, this lifestyle is changing as they shift from growing rice for self-sufficiency to corn as a cash crop. Given these changes, I discuss the possibility of changing the character of *Pi* from a 'sound-producing tool' to a 'musical instrument' that might enhance tourism.

¹ *Bon Chot* is the name in the Lua-Mal language; it is called *Lua Salod* in Thai.

DISCUSSION

The people of Lua-Mal and Toei Klang village

The people called 'Lua', a Mon-Khmer speaking group, are widely dispersed throughout Northern Thailand. They settled in Northern Thailand before the Lanna Kingdom was established in the 13th century.

The people called 'Lua' are divided into two groups, the Palaung and Kham sub-linguistic groups. In Northern Thailand, the Lawa in Chiang Mai and Mea Hong Son belong to the Palaung and the Tin in Nan belong to the Kham. The Lua in Nan, actually the Tin, are divided into two groups, Mal and Pray (Satyawattana, 1987) (Yimrewat and Ratanakul, 1996). In this paper, I report on the Mal people, who are usually called 'Lua-Mal'. *Pi*, the sound-producing tool, is used only among the Lua-Mal people.²

Doi PhuKa National Park in Pua District, Nan Province, contains around 20 villages of Lua-Mal, including Toei-Klang village, my research site. While many of the Lua-Mal villages are Christian, the Toei Klan villagers believe in Buddhism in conjunction with a spirit cult, with deities such as *Chao Luang Pua*, the guardian spirit for the Pua River and Toei Klan village.

The villages in the Doi PhuKa National Park area, including Toei Klang village, are connected by paved

roads, so Lua-Mal villages can communicate with urban areas easily and have become influenced by consumer society. Furthermore, they have accepted Thai culture through contact with the Thai people in the plains areas and are being subsumed into the Thai nation. Increasingly, young people are leaving to work in big cities, such as Bangkok, and losing interest in their traditional rituals in the process.

Traditionally, the villagers of Toei Klang village were mostly engaged in growing dry-field rice, with some corn and herb production, all for home use. The *Bon Chot* ritual entertains the soul of rice produced in a dry field, their staple food.

The structure and sound of *Pi*

Pi is made of *Mai Hia*, a type of bamboo. The wall thickness of *Mai Hia* is lighter than other types of bamboo, producing a good sound. It is used only during the ritual period and only inside the village; the instrument is made anew every year. It is prohibited to take *Pi* outside the village. When the Nan Provincial Government invited the villagers to participate in an ethnic group festival, they refused, because *Pi* is a sacred tool of the village.

Pi consists of a main bamboo tube (*Pon*), a bamboo stick (*Chan*) inserted into the hole of the lower part of the main bamboo tube, and a bamboo

²Another group of Lua in Nan (Tin), the Lua-Pray, also has a bamboo sound-producing tool, called *Pre*. It will be discussed Later.

stick (*Awon*) for beating the Chan. The sound is produced by beating the Chan with the *Awon*. Classified by size, there are five kinds of *Pi* and five kinds of *Amkhom Pi*; these are sounded simultaneously³. *Pi* consists of three bamboo tubes (*Pon*) with *Chan* and *Awon*, which are inserted between the fingers. The shortest tube produces a high tone, the mid-length tube produces a medium tone, and the longest tube produces a low tone. *Amkhom Pi* consists of two bamboo tubes that create high and low tones. They create around 10 ‘melodies’ with special names (Jittreebut, 2000). The most popular melodies are *Tokya*, *Tamlo*, and *Pae*; *Tamlo* means ‘beat well’ and *Pae* means ‘the third’. In addition, some melody names are derived from their sounds, such as *Kumbuntum*, *Choncarapi*, and *Chunchui*, another name for *Pae*. With the exception of *Chama*, the usage of ‘melodies’ of *Pi* is not limited to time and space, but depends on the player, as well. *Chama* should be sounded on the last day of the *Bon Chot* ritual, in front of the shrine of the village guardian spirit, *Chao Luang Pua*. It calls the soul of rice and tells it, “see you again next year”.

The *Bon Chot* ritual – calling and entertaining the soul of rice

Pi is used only for entertaining

and strengthening the soul of rice in the *Bon Chot* ritual as described below. The soul of rice is invited to the rice field when the seeds are prepared for planting, and goes out from the field at the time of harvest. The *Bon Chot* ritual held every August for 10 days is the most significant ritual in this rice planting cycle. The soul of rice is entertained and strengthened in the *Bon Chot* ritual, then restored to good health and grown into beautiful rice.

On the third day of the ritual, the villagers make *Pi* and invite the soul of rice. On the seventh and tenth days, they march, beating *Pi* in the village, and on the tenth day they return *Pi* to the forest. On the eleventh morning, they return the soul of rice to the field.

The soul of rice is invited into the village after the ceremony for inviting the soul of rice. *Pi* is made with the soul of *Pi* invited from the *Mai Hia* bamboo grove, located near the Pua River⁴. The soul of rice is entertained by the sound of *Pi* during the ritual.

• *Inviting the soul of Pi and making Pi* — On the third day, two elders receive the soul of *Pi* from the sacred bamboo grove to cut bamboo to use in making the year’s first *Pi*. The soul of *Pi* is invited to the ceremonial place and two elders bring the soil of that place with the bamboo for making the first *Pi* of the year to the village.

³There are five kinds of *Pi* classified by size; from small to large, they are called *Parot*, *Hai*, *Hi*, *Chumyum*, and *Muiiao*. *Amkhom Pi* are also classified by size; from small to large, they are called *Amkhom Pi Parot*, *Amkhom Pi Hai*, *Amkhom Pi Hi*, *Amkhom Pi Chumyum*, and *Amkhom Pi Muiiao*.

⁴The Pua River is a sacred place guarded by *Chao Luang Pua*, the guardian spirit of Tui Klang village.

In this way, the soul of *Pi* is invited to the village and then *Pi* is made.

- Inviting the soul of rice — On the sixth day, the priest prays for the guardian spirit, *Chao Luang Pua*, at his shrine. After breakfast, villagers go to their own rice fields, inviting the soul of rice to their house⁵

- Sacrifice of chicken for the soul of *Pi* and the soul of rice, and for strengthening the soul of rice

On the afternoon of the sixth day, starting around noon, the villagers gather at the shrine of the guardian spirit, and start to march counterclockwise within the village, while beating *Pi*.

At the priest's house, a chicken's neck is cut and its blood is poured on the altar for the soul of the spirit. Marching villagers stop at the priest's house and go up the stairs one by one with *Pi*. The wife of the priest, who holds the sacrificed chicken, daubs the blood of the chicken onto each *Pi*. In these performances, the chicken is sacrificed for the souls of both the rice and *Pi*.

At the villagers' houses, during the ceremony of strengthening the soul of rice, sacrificed chicken, river crab, bamboo shoot, and ginger are offered to the soul of rice. Through these processes, the soul of rice comes to stay in the village and enjoys the sound of *Pi* that the marching

villagers produce.

- Welcoming and entertaining the soul of rice by the sound of *Pi*

On the seventh day, just past noon, villagers gather at the priest's house. A few women wear red dresses, designed to invite the soul of rice. Then villagers start to march counterclockwise in the village, beating *Pi*. Sometimes they stop, beating *Pi* and dancing. The villagers march to the priest's house, beating *Pi* and dancing, then continue to march, circling inside the village a second time.

- Entertaining the soul of rice and sending the soul of rice to the rice field

After the march of the villagers to the sound of *Pi*, two days pass with no events. On the tenth and last day, villagers march to the sound of *Pi* again; the next day, the soul of rice returns to the rice field.

The following is a sketch of the events of the tenth day:

In the morning, two priests, praying for the soul of the rice, go to the shrine of the spirit of the land to pray. They report to the land spirit that the ritual time is coming.

In the afternoon, the village women, including the women wearing red clothing, start to beat *Pi* in front of the priest's house. They start to march

⁵Actually, one third of all households in the village take their turn to be in charge of inviting the soul of rice each year.

clockwise to the sound of *Pi* in the village, and stop at the shrine of *Chao Luang Pua*, while continuing to beat *Pi*. Then they move to the priest's house and continue to beat *Pi* in the area under the floor⁶. The villagers go up the stairs one by one with *Pi*; the wife of the priest, who holds the sacrificed chicken, daubs the blood of the chicken on each *Pi*. The dead body of the chicken is offered to the altar of the soul of rice with other offerings, signifying 'the soul of rice is coming'.

In the evening, villagers start marching from the priest's house in the second circumambulation of the village with the sound of *Pi*, sometimes stopping to beat *Pi* with dancing, and after arriving back at the priest's house, then go to the village washing place. Villagers wash away the chicken blood daubed on the *Pi* one by one, and then move to the shrine of *Chao Luang Pua*, praying to *Chao Luang Pua* and *Chao Luang Phu ka*, the guardian spirit of Phu Kha Mountain, beating the *Pi*. Finally, they return to the priest's house and throw *Pi* away in the forest behind the house.

The next day, the head of each household goes to each rice field and offers liquor to the soul of rice, signifying the soul of rice has returned

to the field.

This ritual consists of a series of events as follows: (1) inviting the soul of *Pi* from the sacred forest, making *Pi*, and making offerings to it at the priest's house; (2) inviting the soul of rice from the rice field and giving offerings to it at each villager's house; (3) marching counterclockwise in the village while beating *Pi* to welcome and entertain the soul of rice; and (4) marching clockwise in the village while beating *Pi* for entertaining the soul of rice and sending it back to the field.

The soul of rice invited to the village is relaxed, strengthened, and filled with energy by marching to the sound of *Pi*⁷. In this way, the strengthened soul of rice returns to the field and grows into beautiful rice, bringing expectations of a good harvest.

This ritual is a drama performed by the soul of *Pi* from the bamboo (*Mai Hia*) grove and the soul of rice from the rice in the dry field. The offerings for them, such as river crabs and bamboo shoots, symbolize rivers and mountains. The villagers live in harmony with nature, including the rivers, mountains, bamboo groves, and rice in a dry field. The ritual drama is derived from the villagers' life in nature, with *Pi* a sound-producing

⁶The house is on stilts raised above the ground.

⁷Some qigong therapists explain that counterclockwise movements bring a relaxed state and clockwise movements gather energy, but the scientific evidence of this is not clear. Further study is needed to understand the relationship between this explanation and the structure of *Bon Chot* ritual.

tool connected to such life.

It is unclear how the bamboo grove is connected with rice growing in a dry field, but in some places, bamboo groves are chosen for swidden cultivation. The Kham people in Udomsai Province, Lao PDR, choose *Mai Hia* groves because they believe the swiddened *Mai Hia* grove makes rice grow well. Kawano proposes that a complex culture of swidden cultivation and bamboo groves exists in both Southeast Asia and southern Kyushu, Japan (Kawano, 2009). Legends concerning bamboo and rice are found in these areas. The bamboo musical instruments or bamboo sound-producing instruments of the Kalinga people in the Philippines, the *Balingbing*, share similarities with the *Daudau* of the Khamu people in Lao PDR⁸. The idea of a complex culture of swidden cultivation and bamboo groves, which Kawano proposes, might be the key to solving the mystery of these similarities.

Pi as a sound-producing tool

In the case of the *Bon Chot* ritual of Lua-Mal, the mountains, rivers, bamboo groves and rice in dry fields are brought together into one context. *Pi* is a sound-producing tool embedded in this context, not a mere musical instrument for amusement.

The Lua-Mal people have a harp-

shaped musical instrument called *Ko*, unrelated to *Pi*. It is prohibited to play the *Ko* for ritual use, although it can produce the same melody as *Pi*. *Ko* is played for amusement, while *Pi* is beaten only for strengthening the soul of rice in the context of the *Bon Chot* ritual; it is prohibited to beat *Pi* either outside the village or for any other occasion. Villagers also play the musical instruments that the Thai people living in the plains area of Northern Thailand use: *Pin*, a plucked string instrument, and *Salo*, a bowed string instrument. These are usually played for amusement and prohibited for ritual use (although they can be played at the final party after throwing *Pi* away into the forest on the last night of the ritual period). This prohibition stems from a legend – long ago, when people played *Pin* and *Salo* for the soul of rice, the soul of rice got away. Then, when people beat *Pi* for the soul of rice, the soul of rice enjoyed the sound of *Pi*. The villagers believe that rice will not grow beautifully for any person who does not believe that the sound of *Pi* helps rice grow well.

Pi creates a melody by combining high, medium, and low tones. However, *Pi* is a sacred tool which itself has a soul, and it produces a sound to entertain the soul of rice only during the ritual period. Therefore, *Pi* is a

⁸Several bamboo ‘musical’ instruments of Kalinga in the Philippines and that of Khamu in Lao PDR are very similar, such as *Balingbing* in Kaling and *Daudau* in Khamu (a bamboo tube with a slit for beating); *Togaton* in Kalinga and *Tratik* in Khamu (stamping bamboo tubes); and *Togari* in Kalinga and *Tot* in Khamu (nose flutes).

sound-producing tool for religious purposes, rather than a musical instrument used in ordinary musical performances.

As *Pi* is a sound-producing tool for calling and entertaining the soul of rice, it is a tool connected with farming. Another group of Lua in Nan (Tin), the Lua-Pray, also has a bamboo sound-producing tool, called *Pre*. It consists of two bamboo tubes that are inserted between the fingers and a bamboo stick for beating the tubes. The people sound it while walking to the fields to threaten snakes or evil spirits away. Its characteristics are very similar to *Balingbing* in the Philippines, as mentioned above. Here we can find the continuities from farming tool to musical instrument. *Pi* and *Pre* or *Balingbing* (*Daudau*) are beaten for supernatural beings. However, each purpose is different; the former is for entertaining, but the latter is for driving. The purpose of producing sounds with the *Pre* or *Balingbing* (*Daudau*) is similar to the bamboo tools used for driving animals for protecting farm products, such as the *Klock* and *klang* of the Khamu people in Lao PDR (Lindel et al., 1982). However, the sound of the

former is produced by a person, but the sound of the latter is produced by natural wind or water; the former is typically considered a musical instrument⁹. In this way, these several kinds of bamboo sound-producing tools connected with farming have continuities, while differing in character. If a bamboo sound-producing instrument connected with farming is defined as a farming tool in the broad sense, *Pi*, which can produce melodies, is defined in the middle, as both a musical instrument and farming tool.

CONCLUSION

At present, the *Bon Chot* traditional ritual retains its basis in Lua-Mal cosmology. Villagers refused to perform *Pi* in an ethnic group festival, considering it a sacred instrument instead. However, in the future, *Pi* as a sound-producing tool for ritual use may change into a musical instrument for enjoyment. During the ritual, I witnessed villagers who had made *Pi* (with seven bamboo tubes) play Thai pop music for fun. In addition, when marching during the ritual, they sometimes used *Pi* to play *Phan Fai* (the song of spinning), a northern

⁹Landstorm and Tayanin (1982) introduced *Klok* and *Klang* as 'musical instruments'. *Klok* is a small slit drum of bamboo, which is suspended from a higher tree stump in the field; its sound is produced by natural wind. *Klang* is a clepsydra-like device, which is planted in the middle of the brook; its sound is produced by water. They are defined as wind-driven and water-driven ideophones, and categorized as musical scarecrows. Landstorm and Tayanin (1982) seem to compare a sound of nature to music. Thitipol Kanthiwong, interviewed at Chiang Mai University, March 14, 2013, told me that "an instrument whose structure was designed to produce sound, and then handed down through generations, is classified as a 'musical instrument'". The definition of "musical instrument" is so vague.

Thai folk song. These innovations may reflect the changing times, in which amusement and pleasure is invading sacred spaces. Contact with the Thai people in the plains areas and being subsumed into the Thai nation may create the social background for such a change.

This recent change also reflects changes in the production system of the village. In recent years, corn, which was originally grown for home use, has become a commercial crop with the increasing demand for bio-fuel. As corn production increases, rice production will decrease. If rice production declines, then the role of *Pi* to entertain the soul of rice to yield beautiful rice may be lost. Many villagers are anxious about the potential disappearance of the *Bon Chot* ritual. However, few activities support transmitting this ritual to the younger generation, except closing school during the ritual period and modest financial support from the sub-district (*Tambol*) government. While some children and youth are interested in the ritual, some are not. Some villagers insist on preserving and propagating the Lua-Mal traditions, including the *Bon Chot* ritual. One villager, who no longer grew rice, said that “*Pi* performance must be promoted for tourists, considering the recent changing situation”. This implies *Pi* would be used as a musical instrument to entertain an audience, and no longer limited to ritualistic use, nor to performances inside the village only.

In Toei Klang village, villagers

are swaying between adaptations to modern society and preserving traditional culture. They need cash crops for income, but their traditional culture related to cultivating rice has not disappeared. If agro-tourism is promoted, together with preserving *Pi* performance in Toei Klang village, the ritualistic role of *Pi* might be preserved.

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