

Art and Survival - Our Endangered Cultures

- **Vanishing echoes**
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Abstract

Experts agree that with the rush to globalization, half of the world's 6,900 languages will disappear within the next fifty years, and with them will vanish the ideas, history, culture, stories, and songs that these languages embody. This loss is felt not only by the community that has practiced ancestral traditions throughout the millennia, but also by mankind, for cultural diversity provides a source of exchange, innovation and creativity that is vital to the survival of humankind.

For the ancient civilizations of mainland Southeast Asia rooted in oral tradition, music is a primary portal to understanding the world. As these smaller communities become assimilated into the dominant political and economic powers in this new age, may action be taken to preserve their arts, songs and ceremonies in recognition of the multiplicity that once was ours.

Keywords: Endangered Languages, Oral Tradition, Traditional Music, Multiculturalism, Southeast Asia

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” (John Muir)



Mien musician accompanies bride on the Dzat – wedding ceremony, Phayao, Thailand © Victoria Vorreiter 2007

Languages – Living, Endangered and Extinct

Our world of multiplicity stands at a decisive crossroads as the inevitable rush towards standardizing globalization finds its way to even the most remote corners of the planet. Launched in great part by technology in its manifold forms and massive international trade, a clear line in the chronology of humanity has been drawn, a before-and-after from which there is no doubt and no escape. The last century has seen the loss of innumerable languages, songs, crafts, practices and lifestyles, and the next has little hope of saving those in the smaller populations that remain, which until now have contributed to a dizzying, breathtaking mix, proving the human species one of the most diverse on earth.

The causes of cultural homogeneity are many and complex. Assimilation into a dominant culture results as smaller communities adopt the language, views and mores of larger political and economic powers. Young generations, lured by the modern ethos that cities offer, are moving away from their villages. Compulsory schooling favors the national language. The growth of global media, the introduction of money, the distribution of certain material goods, religious conversion and immigration hasten the dissolution of oral cultures. Such ruinous factors as invasion, war, and ethnic cleansing can extinguish native tongues definitively.

Responding to the urgency of this shift, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) maintains an atlas of languages facing extinction. Linguists estimate that more than 6,900 languages currently exist,

ranging in size from those with hundreds of millions of speakers to those with only one or two. Experts concur that this number will diminish by half by year 2050. With the loss of these nearly 3,500 tongues, the world of ideas, history, culture, beliefs, stories and songs that they embody will also vanish. This is a decimating reality.

Language and the Arts

Language is the dynamic vehicle that allows us to express our understanding of the outer world and our perception of the inner one. In oral societies, this finds form as stories and myths, drama and poetry, rituals and songs. These arts, rather than playing a peripheral role, are in fact ingenious strategies, crucial for transmitting culture and traditions intact from one generation to the next. Together the arts make up the very foundation of humanity, giving each community its unique sense of identity, history, values, and spirituality, providing a sense of structure, a “support—of moral order, cohesion, vitality, and creative powers.” (J. Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, 9)

Take away language and the arts it inspires and that community loses its anchor and its wellspring, for what follows is “uncertainty and with uncertainty, disequilibrium, since life requires life-supporting illusions.” (Ibid.) We have only to look at indigenous societies whose oral traditions have been debased, forgotten, even wiped out. Without the communal identity and connection that culture offers, a people becomes susceptible to degradation, instability, and dissolution. A traditional Akha saying expresses well this lack of center, “If a village has no music, how can it be called a village?” The arts emerge as a social construct evolved to harmonize the internal and external energies of a community with the natural world. They become an important means of initiating and recognizing members of that society and of communicating a people’s life-credo to succeeding generations.

This loss is felt not only by the community that has practiced these traditions throughout millennia, but also by mankind. Multiculturalism enhances the human experience, offering a sense of richness, resilience, strength and wonder. There is much to be gleaned from the wisdom, perspectives, the sheer beauty of others. Just as the long-term survival of life on earth depends on the diversity of species and ecosystems, so perhaps too must the survival of humanity be sustained by cultural pluralism. At its General Conference on Cultural Diversity in November 2001, UNESCO declared in its opening statement: “Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.” (UNESCO, *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, Article 1, p. 13)

The Power of Music



Karen S'gaw musicians – New Year festival, playing Kwaeh horns, Chiang Mai, Thailand © Victoria Vorreiter 2009

When words are expressed through melody and rhythm, the reach of language is infinitely expanded. Music indeed is the most powerful of the arts because of its special qualities, for sound is unique in all the range of perception. Songs and the instrumental rites they evoke are able to alter at the same time our body, mind, heart and soul. Without physical form, music is invisible, intangible, abstract. Melodies and rhythms must enter into us to be perceived, seeping into the unconscious where they can instantly transform each person in mysterious and distinct ways. It is not surprising that music is integral with emotional life, the sacred experience, and healing. Yet tone and pulse have the extraordinary ability to be felt physically when vibrations beat on the body in sound waves. The constant thudding of a drumbeat is able to bring together the disparate energies of an entire group in an instant. Music is not static. Phrases chanted in a continual loop for hours or days unfold in a continuum of time and space that echoes the eternal circular passages found in nature—the phases of days, seasons, planetary phenomena, cycles of a single life and passages of generations. Music finds order in repetitious verses and organized rhythmic periods, making it an essential mnemonic tool to anchor information. Music, as a medium that transcends language, is ever-present and integral in the lives of traditional peoples because of its mighty power and mystery.

Traditional Peoples of Southeast Asia

Oral tradition lives on in the foothills of the Himalayas where Laos, Myanmar and Thailand once knew no boundaries. Throughout the millennia this region of

Southeast Asia, evocatively known as the Golden Triangle, has served as a cultural and historical crossroads of ancient migrations from the highlands of China and Tibet, trade routes connecting India and Mongolia, and passages along the great rivers of Asia. Yet for all the movement and interchange, the Golden Triangle harbors a staggering number and variety of peoples living in remote hill villages, which have effectively safeguarded their individuality. Numbering over one hundred thirty groups and subgroups, each tribe represents an extraordinary, unique world, distinctive in language, customs, arts, religion, dress, and features.

Prominent among this multiplicity are the Akha, Lahu, Lisu Hmong, Mien and Karen, six distinct peoples who originally migrated from southwest and south central China, converging in the mountain ranges that sweep Southeast Asia. Preferring high altitudes, these groups traditionally live as hunters and subsistence dry-field farmers, practicing swidden agriculture on steep, forested mountain slopes. Despite the necessity for frequent migrations in search of harvestable terrain, they have flourished, maintaining their independence and identity to a high degree.

Each of these major groups is composed of numerous branches, which have individually moved from one remote mountaintop to another, fanning out throughout the region. It is possible for two subgroups to have developed in such isolation that their languages and traditions are incomprehensible to each other. This diversity in peoples highlights the stunning variety found in the musical traditions in the Golden Triangle.

Music of the Golden Triangle



Akha Puli Hulai shamans – blessing ceremony at spirit gate, Muang Sing, Laos © Victoria Vorreiter 2006



Lahu Shi man and grandson – harvest festival Keng Tung, Myanmar © Victoria Vorreiter 2005

For these ancient civilizations of Southeast Asia, a primary portal to understanding the world is through sound. People live close to nature and listen to an earth that is never silent. Their universe is perceived as a dynamic, inseparable whole, and its rhythms can be found everywhere, from the cycles of the seasons to the passages of their lives. In a harsh and variable wilderness where survival depends on full awareness of the physical world, they have developed a heightened auditory sense to navigate the elements. Knowledge is inherited through sound, as it is handed down through time and memory. Songs and stories reveal the wisdom of the first ancestors, passing in an unbroken chain from mother to daughter, father to son, shaman to apprentice. Traditional peoples consider that which is audible a reflection of inaudible energy beyond the earthly world. Ancient chants and trance rituals provide the link to the unseen realm of spirits. Whereas modern society has shifted attention to the visual world, overwhelming the eye, traditional cultures of Southeast Asia continue to foster auditory perception, which remains keenly attuned and profoundly valued.

Aligned so perceptively to their sonic environment, traditional peoples listen to the songs, ceremonies and stories of their forebears at a deep level and with great reverence. These are the living archives of centuries of accumulated culture, history, and tenets of faith, providing the eternal link between those who have gone before with those who will follow. An all-night healing ceremony or a three-day wedding has great significance beyond the function of treatment or union. These highly organized, intricately ordered, meticulously observed rites fulfill a sacred purpose that is engrained in people's consciousness and essential to their worldview.



Eng musician with Glung Glan – fertility festival
Kengtung, Myanmar © Victoria Vorreiter 2006

The keepers of the bardic tradition – the master musicians, shamans, headmen, matriarchs and patriarchs – use their rich trove of songs, legends and rites to connect people with something greater than themselves. Music, supported by ritual and formality, anchors members of a community to their life-source. It reunites them with their ancestors and aligns them with their deities. Ceremonies and songs remind them of their origins and preserve collective memory. Music promotes a sense of communal harmony by instilling identity and belonging. Songs are the chronicles and oracles of tribal ways of life.

Intangible legacy

The music, myths, and ceremonies that express a people's worldview are the outcome of sustained collective devotion, creativity, and effort. These traditions are robust in the way they have survived for millennia, but they are also extremely fragile, for unlike monuments or places in nature, oral tradition remains an intangible legacy.

In most animistic societies rooted in oral culture, no written record of their beliefs exists. Rather they are imprinted in the memories of those who continue to live them. With the advance of globalization and the rush to modernity, young people are foregoing the ways of their ancestors. Should one generation fail to pass on what it knows to the next, thousands of years of accumulated knowledge will die with little trace within a few decades.

The oral traditions found in the Golden Triangle that were once so vital a century ago are in jeopardy of vanishing with the wind. We must bear witness to the majesty and diversity of cultures on our planet by making a commitment to swift action, preserving those arts that are in decline and safeguarding those that continue to live and evolve in this new age. Should we lose these, we will surely lose a part of the soul of our humanity.

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