

**Music, ethnicity and heritage:
A comparison of Then and Lèn đồng rituals in Vietnam**

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This paper makes some exploratory comparisons between Lèn đồng rituals of the Việt and Then rituals of the Tày. I have conducted extensive research on Lèn đồng rituals since the mid 1990s, but I have limited direct experience of Then rituals so my discussion of Then is primarily based on the work of other Vietnamese scholars. The comparison of Lèn đồng and Then in this paper is oriented around three issues. First, the paper discusses the relations between music and trance and the role of music during rituals; second, it explores how ritual musics are involved in representations of ethnic identity; third, it considers the theatricalization and heritagization of ritual practices and how the meanings of musical performance are affected by the promotion of religious rituals as intangible cultural heritage.

Lèn đồng rituals hold a central place in a system of Mother Goddess beliefs. The pantheon of spirits, which forms the backbone of the religious system, consists of hierarchy of ranks of spirits: the mother spirits (mẫu), General Trần Hưng Đạo, mandarins (quan), ladies (châu), princes (ông hoàng), princesses (cô) and young princes (cậu). During Lèn đồng rituals, a male or female medium usually incarnates several spirits from each spirit rank. Throughout Lèn đồng, a small group of musicians perform sequences of châu văn songs for each incarnated spirit. In previous publications I have argued that châu văn music has multiple roles during rituals (see Norton 2004, 2009, 2013). Music makes possession possible by affecting the heart-soul of the possessee and inducing euphoric emotions: mediums feel the spirits and châu văn music in their heart and heart-soul. Once the spirit has been incarnated, music animates ritual action and incites dance; without “sweet playing and interesting singing” (đàn ngọt hát hay) possession is short-lived. Songs performed during Lèn đồng structure time and entrain bodily movement. Sung text narrates ritual action and recalls the past.

Discussion of the role of music during Then rituals is complicated by the fact that there are numerous types of Then ritual and significant regional differences

between ritual practices in different northern provinces, like Tuyên Quang, Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn. It is also important to note that Then rituals are not only conducted by Tày people but also numerous other minority groups in northern Vietnam. Such diversity in Then practices makes it difficult to make generalisations. Various classifications of Then rituals, however, have been proposed by scholars. Nguyễn Thị Yên, for instance, suggests that there are four main types of Then: 1) Then chúc tụng, performed for celebratory purposes such as weddings and other commemorative events; 2) Then bói or fortune-telling Then, which are held with the aim of divination and curing illnesses; 3) Then đi hành nghề, small scale rituals held at the request of the head of a household for specific issues relating to family members; and 4) Lầu Then, large-scale rituals including the most elaborate ceremony Lầu Then cấp sắc ('Certificate Issuing' Then), which is performed over several days to recognise a new Then master (Nguyễn Thị Yên 2010: 100-103).¹ The diversity of ritual practices is also evident in the range of spirits worshipped during Then. These include a wide range of 'ghosts'/'spirits' (phi), spirit soldiers (thiên tướng) and ancestor spirits (tổ tiên), as well as numerous male and female deities connected to Buddhist and Doaist beliefs, such as the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng) and the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy (Phật Bà Quan Âm) (see Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004: 425-429; Nguyễn Thị Yên 2010: 215-235). The music performed during Then consists of singing accompanied by one or more tính tẩu lutes and bell rattles (bộ nhạc xóm). In some sections of large-scale rituals other percussion instruments like hand-held cymbals and drums are also played.

Vietnamese scholars have discussed Then in relation to distinctions that have been made between shamanism and mediumship. According to Mircea Eliade's classic study of shamanism, a shaman "is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld" (Eliade 1989 [1951]: 5). The 'magical flight' of shamans contrasts with mediums who are possessed by spirits. According to Vietnamese scholars, Then masters should be considered shamans because they 'loose their soul' (xuất hồn) during some rituals (e.g. Võ Quang Trọng 2004; Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004: 442; 449), whereas ritual specialists who organise Lầu đồng are mediums because they are a vehicle for spirits. During Then, however, Then masters are also

¹ For a different classification of Then rituals see Nông Văn Hoàn (1978: 21-26); see also Ngô Đức Thịnh (2004: 436-437).

possessed by spirits and states of trance are more closely connected to possession than soul loss (Nguyễn Thị Yên 2010: 188; Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004).

Numerous scholars since Eliade have questioned the basis for making a distinction between shamanism and mediumship (e.g. Lewis 1989 [1971]), and in recent scholarship the terms medium and shaman are sometimes used synonymously. However, Gilbert Rouget's survey of the relations between music and trance also distinguishes between possession trance and shamanic trance (Rouget 1985 [1980]). The difference between shamanism and spirit possession, Rouget argues, is based around a "series of three oppositions: journey to the spirits/visit by the spirits; control over the spirits/submission to the spirits; voluntary trance/involuntary trance" (1985 [1980]: 132). In musical terms, a fundamental difference, Rouget argues, is that the shaman is the "musicant" (i.e. the shaman actively sings and/or plays an instrument) whereas the possessed person is "musicated" (i.e. musicians who do not go in to trance play music for the possessed). As a 'musicant', the shaman "imposes his imaginary world upon the group, whereas the possessed person is musicated since the group imposes the imaginary content upon him" (1985 [1980]: 132). In the case of shamanism, Rouget considers music's primary role to be "incantatory" as it "brings to life the imaginary world of the invisible" (1985 [1980]: 319) and is "endowed with magical power" (1985 [1980]: 131). This is distinguished from possession trance in which music 'socialises trance' through its 'identificatory character' (Rouget 1985 [1980]: 321-326). In other words, music socialises trance by enabling both the possessed and the entire group to identify the divinity responsible for the trance. In sum, Rouget argues that possession music is "of a practical order: it summons the gods, makes the dancers whirl, creates contact between men and gods, arouses emotion. It has no other powers. The shaman's music, on the contrary, claims, in certain cases at least, to transform the world ... it is magical: through the power of incantation when it is vocal and when the words and their musical shaping are what counts, or through the power of sound when it is instrumental" (1985 [1980]: 131).

Rouget's distinctions between shamanism/possession, musicant/musicated and incantatory/identificatory are interesting to consider in relation to Lèn ðồng and Then. Mediums during Lèn ðồng are musicated as a *chầu văn* band perform music for them, whereas Then masters are musicants because they perform music. The capacity for music to socialize possession is evident during Lèn ðồng as *chầu văn* songs let all the ritual participants know which spirit is being incarnated. However, *chầu văn* does not

merely identify the spirits, rather it actively ‘makes’ the presence of spirits. Just as possessed mediums must wear the clothes of spirits and carry out their work, so must the spirits be immersed in their music. Through sound and sung text, spirits are musically constructed and the past is vividly brought into the present. Compared with *Lên đồng*, is the music performed during *Then* rituals incantatory, identificatory or does it have other effects? While I would need to conduct further research to properly address this question some reflections by other scholars are suggestive. Ngô Đức Thịnh states that the bell rattles used during *Then* are a “symbol of *Then* ghost soldiers” and he suggests that instrumental music and singing helps “integration” (*hòa nhập*) with spirits (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004: 442). Võ Quang Trọng argues that the *tính tẩu* lute and bell rattles effectively express “the stamping sound of ghost soldiers starting off on their journey and strengthen the atmosphere of the ritual” (Võ Quang Trọng 2004: 418; see also Nguyễn Thị Yên 2010:134). The words sung during rituals also narrate the stories, deeds and myths about the spirits (Nguyễn Thị Yên 2010; Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004: 443-444). It should be noted, however, that *Then* masters perform different types of music, depending on the stage of the ritual and the ritual occasion. Also, music is absent at some points during *Lầu Then cấp sắc* rituals, which raises questions about how music relates to the maintenance of trance. In short, further research is needed to provide a fine grained analysis of the role of music during *Then* rituals.

Ethnomusicological research on ‘music and ethnicity’ has discussed how music often functions as a powerful marker of ethnic identity (see Stokes 1994; Radano and Bohlman 2000). In regard to *Lên đồng* and *Then* rituals, music and ethnicity are intertwined in different ways. During *Lên đồng* mediums make connections with spirits associated with different parts of Vietnam and with so-called ethnic minorities from the mountainous regions in northern and central Vietnam. Many of the lady spirits (*chầu*) incarnated during *Lên đồng* are thought to belong to ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. For example, the Tenth Lady (*Chầu Mười*) is a *Tày* spirit and the the Sixth Lady (*Chầu Lục*) is a *Nùng* spirit (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996: 34). The place, gender, and ethnicity of the spirits are musically constructed through the performance of different songs for female mountain, female lowland, and male spirits. For instance, the “*Xá*” group of melodies, which are performed for female mountain spirits some of whom are ethnic minority spirits, convey the atmosphere of the

mountains through reputedly evoking the music of minority groups in Vietnam. To cite a specific example, when the Tenth Lady is incarnated *chầu văn* musicians often play a special “Xá” melody called “Xá Dây Tố Lan”, which musically evokes the Tày ethnicity of the spirit. A distinctive characteristic of “Xá Dây Tố Lan” is that the two strings of the *đàn nguyệt* moon lute – which in northern Vietnam is the main instrument used to accompany *chầu văn* songs – are tuned to the interval of a minor seventh, an unusual interval compared with the typical tuning of a perfect fourth or perfect fifth. There is no connection between the moon-lute tuning of a minor seventh used for “Xá Dây Tố Lan” and the tuning of the *tính tẩu* lute of the Tày as the two strings of the *tính tẩu* are usually tuned to an interval of a perfect fourth or perfect fifth (Phạm Nguyên 1978: 350).² The melody of “Xá Dây Tố Lan” is also not directly influenced by the music of Then rituals. The lack of a direct connection between “Xá Dây Tố Lan” and the music of Then is not surprising because, in general, the relationship between the “Xá” group of melodies and ‘ethnic minority’ musics is, to a great extent, imagined. Rather than being directly influenced by the different styles of music performed by minority groups, the musical representation of ethnicity in *Lên đồng* – as well as the dress, behaviour and dances of ‘ethnic minority’ lady spirits who are incarnated during *Lên đồng* – advances stereotypical notions of a pan-ethnic minority identity rendered female, natural, happy, simple, colorful, and lively. The processes of imagining ethnicity evident in *Lên đồng* rituals might be seen as promoting unhelpful stereotypes that hinder rather than enhance cultural understanding. However, Vietnamese folklore scholars have extolled the value of ritual practices, suggesting that they contribute to cultural exchange between the Việt majority and ethnic minority groups (see Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992: 140). Such arguments should be understood within the context of scholars’ attempts to legitimize mediumship, which in the past was criticized as superstition. Nevertheless, the interpretation of *Lên đồng* as multiculturalist is complicit with nationalist discourse, which aims to incorporate the diversity of ethnic minority groups into a single “community” dominated by the Việt majority.

Musical representations of ethnic identity during Then rituals are quite different to *Lên đồng*. The *tính tẩu* lute performed during Then is often promoted as a symbol of an essentialised Tày ethnicity. The large festival called “*Lễ hội thành*

² In the case of the 3-stringed *tính tẩu* lute the bottom two strings are usually tuned to an interval of an octave and the top two strings are tuned to the interval of a perfect fourth or fifth.

Tuyên”, which took place in Tuyên Quang city in September 2015, for instance, focused strongly on the *tính tẩu* lute as a symbol of ethnicity. On the stage, large groups of performers brandished *tính tẩu* lutes alongside banners that proclaimed them to be Tày, and at the climax of the performance, an enormous *tính tẩu* lute was paraded on a float in front of the audience. In Then rituals, however, spirits are not assigned to different ethnic minority groups in the manner of lady spirits during *Lên đồng*. Such differences in the representation of ethnicity in Then and *Lên đồng* rituals are intriguing in the context of identity politics in Vietnam. In the system of Mother Goddess beliefs, minority groups are symbolically incorporated into the religious system, whereas in Then rituals performances on the *tính tẩu* lute are typically interpreted as a marker of Tày ethnic identity. During Then rituals, then, Tày people are differentiated from the Việt majority, whereas in *Lên đồng* the Việt majority appropriate minority spirits and stereotypically represent a pan-ethnic minority identity. Such contrasting representations of ethnicity in the religious systems of *Lên đồng* and Then rituals, would seem to be indicative of nationalist discourse and the asymmetrical power relations between the Việt majority and minority groups.

To conclude, I will briefly refer to the theatricalization and heritagization of rituals. The creation of secular, staged re-enactments of *Lên đồng* rituals began in the early 1990s with performances known as the ‘Three Spirits’ (*Ba giá*) by *chèo* folk theatre performers (see Norton 2009). Since the late 2000s, mediums have also begun to ‘perform’ *Lên đồng* for secular audiences. Both state-run *chèo* troupes and mediums themselves are now re-presenting possession on the stage as a celebration of ‘heritage’ and ‘national culture’. Similarly, music from Then rituals is often performed on the stage at festivals designed to showcase ‘ethnic heritage’. The performance of ritual musics as a form of entertainment in the staging of heritage raises questions about religious significance. At the international conference, “Preserve and Promote the Value of Then Heritage of Tày, Nùng and Thái People in Vietnam” held in Tuyên Quang city in September 2015, there was lively debate about the extent to which the music of Then had been secularized and whether it should be considered to be folk art rather than a form of religious music. In both *Lên đồng* and Then, the transfiguring of religious devotion and ritual as heritage has blurred the boundaries between theatrical and spiritual performance, between entertainment and religious devotion.

In tandem with the secularisation of ritual music, Then rituals and the Mother Goddess beliefs of Lèn đòng are increasingly being promoted as heritage and they are both in the process of being considered for nomination to become inscribed by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage. While UNESCO recognition has potential benefits, notably raised prestige, public awareness and international recognition, it is important to note potential pitfalls and dangers. Top-down systems of cultural management at international and national levels raiseorny issues concerning the ownership, control and stewardship of cultural traditions at the local level (see Titon 2009; Norton 2014). For example, an over emphasis on using local cultural forms to promote nationalist sentiments and national identity may overshadow other meanings of cultural practices, may limit diverse approaches to cultural sustainability, and may inhibit innovation and change. UNESCO criteria for the recognition of intangible cultural heritage refer to the importance of the participation and involvement of communities, group and individuals, yet collective agreement amongst cultural practitioners is not always forthcoming and some individual and groups may feel disadvantaged or even excluded by safeguarding measures driven by international and national initiatives and agendas. The challenge for government and international agencies engaged in the cultural sphere is to facilitate a system of cultural stewardship that encourages diversity, innovation and participation, rather than solely seeing cultural and religious practices as a resource for bolstering national identity and promoting Vietnamese culture on the national and international stage.

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